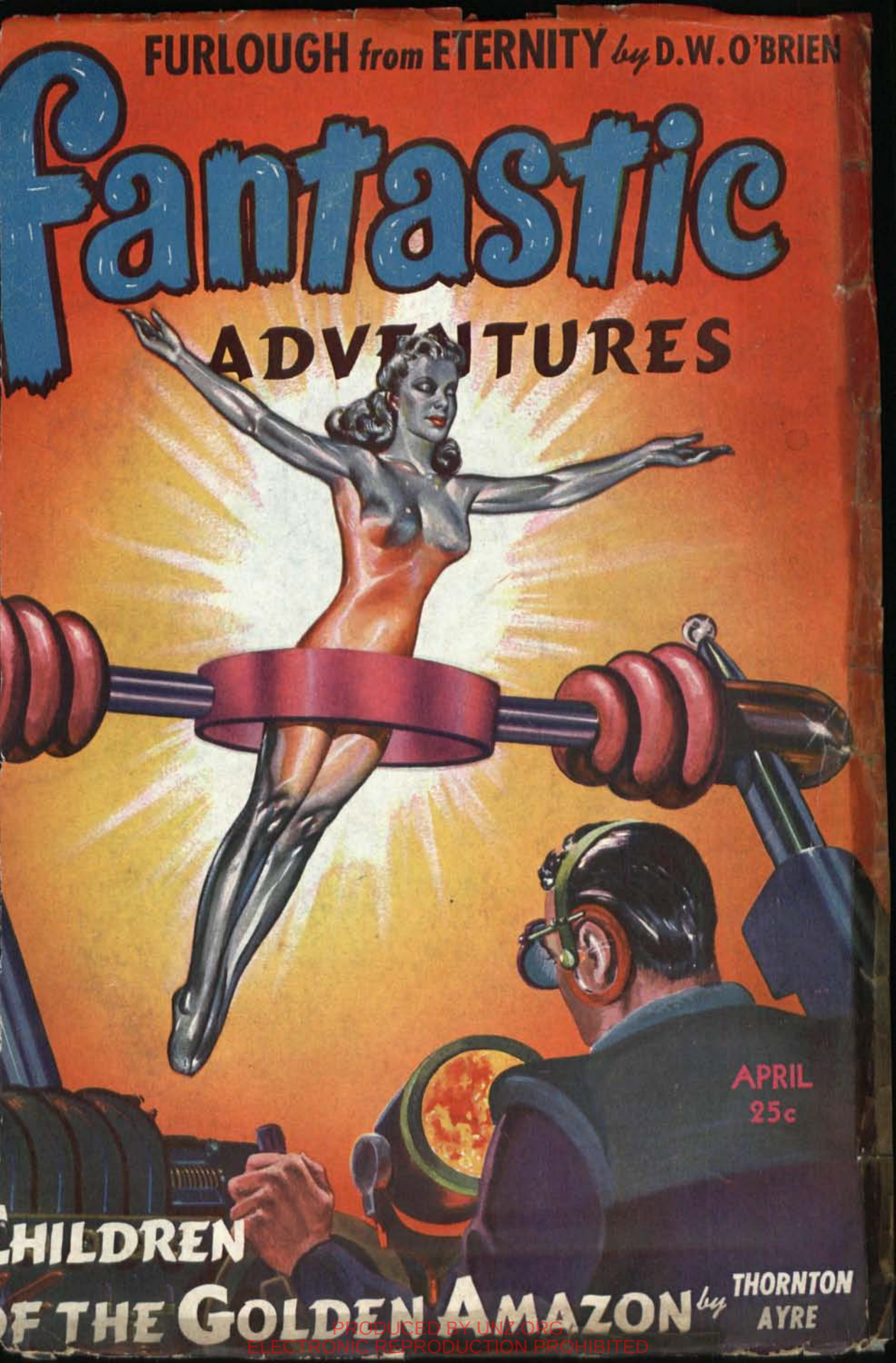
FURLOUGH from ETERNITY by D.W. O'BRIEN

Fantastic

ADVENTURES



APRIL
25c

HILDREN
F THE GOLDEN AMAZON by THORNTON AYRE

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You're in the Army now,
You're not behind the plow,
While doing the hitch
Fight flakes and itch . . .

IT MAY BE
Infectious Dandruff

GET AFTER IT NOW WITH LISTERINE

That's a swell treatment whether you're in the Service or out, whether you're a man or a woman. It's the tested treatment that has helped so many to control this troublesome condition.

Kills "Bottle Bacillus"

Just douse Listerine Antiseptic on scalp and hair twice daily and follow with vigorous and persistent massage. What coolness! What freshness! And what germ-killing power!

The minute Listerine Antiseptic hits the scalp it starts to kill millions of germs accompanying infectious dandruff including the "bottle bacillus." This ugly little customer is held, by numerous dermatologists, to be a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

Don't Delay. Start Now!

After a few treatments you'll be delighted to see how quickly flakes and scales, inflammation and itching begin to disappear. That is what 76% of dandruff sufferers found in a carefully supervised test.

If you have any of these symptoms don't delay. Start now. Remember, the infectious type of dandruff is a germ infection and, naturally, calls for germ-killing treatment. Remember, Listerine is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 50 years in the field of oral hygiene.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

Dear Mom:
One of the things I miss most in Camp is that good old Listerine Tooth Paste that does such a nifty job of cleansing and makes your mouth feel so clean. For Pete's sake, mail me a tube—the Post Exchange is sold out.

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Be a RADIO Technician

I Train Beginners at Home for Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

More Now Make $30 $40 $50 a Week than Ever Before

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 28 Years

Here's your opportunity to get a good job in a busy wartime industry with a bright peacetime future! There is a shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. If you're in a rut, worried because your present job will not last — find out about RADIO!

Mail the Coupon. I will send you FREE my 64-page, illustrated book, RICH REWARDS IN RADIO. It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs, tells how N. R. I. trains you at home in spare time, explains the unique training method which I have developed and perfected during my 28 years of teaching Radio by mail.

Many Beginners Quickly Learn to Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Many N. R. I. students make extra money fixing Radios in spare time while learning. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

Right now, probably in your neighborhood, there's room for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. The Radio repair business is booming, because no new Radios are being made. Many Radio Technicians are starting their own FULL time Radio businesses . . . making $30, $40, $50 a week.

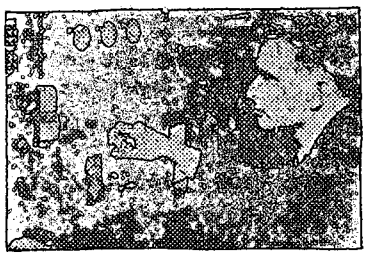
Other trained Radio men take good-pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Many more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians. Radio Manufacturers need trained Technicians to help fill Government wartime orders. Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. And think of the NEW jobs Television, Frequency Modulation, and other Radio developments will open after the war! I give you the Radio knowledge required for jobs in these fields.

How the "N. R. I. Method" Paves the Way to Good Pay

The up-to-the-minute Radio Technician must have BOTH a theoretical knowledge and a *practical* understanding of how to *apply* Radio principles. I give you thorough training in Radio Theory . . . show you how to *use* your knowledge. N. R. I. trains you "from the ground up" — covers Fundamentals thoroughly: Radio Terms, Symbols, Diagrams; Receiver Troubles, Servicing; Television; FM Receivers, Transmitters; Cathode Ray Oscilloscopes; Electronic Controls, etc. These are just a FEW of the subjects you'll cover before you finish my Course!

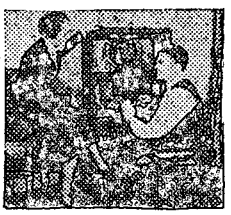
A Great School Helps You Toward The Rich Rewards in Radio

Throughout your training, the staff and resources of the world's largest private institution devoted entirely to training men for Radio will be squarely behind you. N. R. I. has stuck to the *one* job of teaching Radio for 28 years. My entire staff of more than 100 people devotes *full time* to Radio training. Our combined efforts have made the Course so *interesting*, with hundreds of pictures, charts, and diagrams—so *easy-to-grasp*, with special teaching methods designed especially for home training—that we believe you will be "old friends" with Radio almost before you know it.



Broadcasting Stations employ N. R. I. trained Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other capacities and pay well.

Set Servicing pays many N. R. I. trained Radio Technicians $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 extra a week in spare time.



EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the coupon now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

I Trained These Men

$10 a Week in Spare Time
"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week — just spare time."—JOHN JERRY, 1537 Kalamath St., Denver, Colorado.

$200 a Month in Own Business
"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

Lieutenant in Signal Corps
"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N. R. I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)

Find Out What N. R. I. Can Do for YOU

MAIL THE COUPON for my FREE 64-page book. It is packed with Radio facts, things you never knew about opportunities with the Government, in Broadcasting, Radio Servicing, Manufacturing, other Radio fields.

You'll read a complete description of my Course—Extra Money Job Sheets—Consultation Service—other special N. R. I. training features. You'll see the fascinating jobs Radio offers and how to learn Radio at home. You'll read many letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. No obligation. Just MAIL THE COUPON.—J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 3CM, Washington, D. C.

Training Men for Vital Radio Jobs

FREE BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3CM
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio."
(No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

NAME ..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE.....

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APRIL

TRADE MARK REGISTERED

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Front cover painting by Malcolm Smith illustrating a scene from "Children of the Golden Amazon." Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul depicting "Hercules—The God of Strength." Illustrations by Frank R. Paul; Magarian; Ned Hadley; Robert Gibson Jones; Malcolm Smith; Robert Fuqua; Rod Ruth.

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APRIL, 1943

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VOLUME 5
NUMBER 4

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"THIS WISDOM MUST DIE!"

Truths That Have Been Denied Struggling Humanity

FOR every word that has left the lips of bishops or statesmen to enlighten man, a thousand have been withheld. For every book publicly exposed to the inquiring mind, one hundred more have been suppressed—*damned to oblivion*. Each year of progress has been wilfully delayed centuries. Wisdom has had to filter through biased, secret sessions or ecclesiastical council meetings, where high dignitaries of state and church alone proclaimed what man should know.

Are you prepared to demand the hidden facts of life? Will you continue to believe that you are not capable of weighing the worth of knowledge that concerns your personal freedom and happiness? Realize that much that can make your life more *understandable* and *livable* has been left unexplained or intentionally destroyed. At first by word of mouth only, and *now* by private discourses, are *revealed* those truths which secret brotherhoods preserved in ancient temples and hidden sanctuaries, from those who sought to selfishly deprive humanity of them.

THIS *free* BOOK OF EXPLANATION

Let the Rosicrucians, one of these ancient brotherhoods of learning, tell you about these amazing truths, and explain how you, too, like thousands of others, may now use them to enjoy the fullness of life. The Rosicrucians, (not a religious organization) invite you to use the coupon opposite and receive the FREE copy of the fascinating, Sealed Book, with its startling tale of *self help*.

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SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

Scribe U. A. X.
THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California, U.S.A.

Please send me your FREE Sealed Book. I am sincerely interested in learning how I may receive these long-concealed facts of life.

Name.....

Address.....

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

ORDINARILY we start off the Notebook with a few comments on "what's in this issue" but this time we're going to start off by shooting off our mouth about next month's lead story. It's by a new writer William Brengle, and it is written around a cover by McCauley, featuring a new Mac Girl. This time she's our own secretary (remember we promised you she'd pose for us?) and we suppose she'll hate like the very devil to have us say it—but she makes a lovely Mac Girl!

HOWEVER, the story is something we must say a few more words about. A long time ago a fellow named Jonathan Swift wrote a yarn called Gulliver's travels, about a place named Lilliput. Well, Brengle takes his characters to the same place, and meets a lot of Swift's famous characters. The result is what we deem a mighty swell story, and it's a long one too. You'll have a lot of fun reading it.

NOW to get to this issue. We hardly know what to mention first, but since variety is the keynote of the issue, we won't attempt any comparison, nor any preference. You'll have as tough a job as we did, picking "bests."

THORNTON AYRE'S "Golden Amazon" comes back after a long absence, bringing with her her two children. "Children Of The Golden Amazon" is perhaps the most scientific fantasy we've run in a long time, and perhaps it might rightly have gone in our sister magazine, *Amazing Stories*. But the Amazon is certainly FANTASTIC'S character, so here she is. We think you'll enjoy an Ayre fantasy, with his mystical atmospheric writing and his convincing way of making the impossible sound logical and everyday.

OUR long novel this month is by David Wright O'Brien, who comes out of his retirement to do "Furlough From Eternity," and immediately goes back into it. If you read between the lines, you'll infer that the great O'Brien has gone static on us, and won't be in the next issue, simply because the confounded Irishman won't write! But maybe it's better—because this yarn is certainly a sweet one!

SO POPULAR is our new "regular," E. K. Jarvis, that we sent him a Magarian illustration to use in a story. The result is "The Curse Of Many Hands" and if you've been looking for that "different" story, here it is! Jarvis will be back very often, we guarantee.

BRIGHT ideas and how to cash in on them have always been Lefty Feep's forte, and in the story for this month, "Lefty Feep And The Racing Robot" we have the most cockeyed of all cockeyed schemes—and *how* it goes wrong! Poor Lefty—he always means well, and then gets it in the neck. Except for the saving grace of a last-minute miracle, he'd soon be the "most picked on" man in fantasy fiction! For a hint, who but LF would put a robot on a racing horse?

CLEE GARSON launches into humor with "The Merchant Of Venus" and there's really a belly laugh waiting you in its 15,600 words of one swell idea in fantasy! What happens in this yarn "shouldn't happen to a dog."

LADIES, we promised you a treat some months ago. We're finally presenting it—a story written by one of you—by a woman. Yes, the gals can do it—and Doris Thomas proves it in "The Bracelet" in this issue! Really, the story is an excellent fantasy, and packed with a quality we previously thought only male writers could instill into a story. An indefinable feminine charm characterizes its fantasy, and combined with fine action and plot, the result is a story you'll enjoy and remember.

FOR the answer to a question that is in itself intriguing, you'd better read Bruce Dennis' "Where In The Warehouse?" What it is that is where, we won't tell you; nor will we tell you where what is. Whatever it is, it's in the warehouse somewhere. Which doesn't make much sense, but the story will! Read it and find out for yourself.

FOR a change, we've got a detective story in FANTASTIC . . . now wait a minute! Don't go off half-cocked. It's a fantastic detective story, about a little French sleuth who rids a house of a ghost! Except that he wasn't exactly expecting the solution that presented itself. Nor will you! "The Last Case Of Jules De Granjerque" by John York Cabot is another of those now familiar idea yarns by our most unusual author (we mean his ideas, not the man himself!).

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HAROLD LAWLOR (graduated student of Don Wilcox) presents "Daughters Of Darkness." It's another "hell" yarn, but different! Congrats on a swell job, Harold.

THERE you are—nine stories, and although ancient peoples regarded that as the unluckiest of all numbers, we'll ignore that as just superstition. And we think anything as enjoyable as the stories we've put in this issue certainly ought to make even the Fates smile benignly at the mystic number and forget to "bear down" on us.

EVER since Julian S. Krupa enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, we've been getting letters every month, asking for his work. We had to explain several times what had happened to this very popular artist. And we had to mention with regret that we couldn't please those of you who asked for his work. Now, the most welcome news we've had on the artist front so far is the news that Julian has been honorably discharged from the Marines and is at work at his old love, illustrating for FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and *Amazing Stories,* and in addition, for *Mammoth Detective.* Next month you'll see the first of his new work in our pages.

OUR cover this month is by Malcolm Smith, illustrating Thornton Ayre's "Amazon" story. It strikes us as a very unusual cover, and certainly an effective one. Except that we certainly wouldn't like the Amazon's daughter as frozen as she will soon be if "somebody doesn't *do* sumpin' "!

FOR you McCauley fans, the Mac Girl will appear on the May issue of AMAZING STORIES too, and . . . yes . . . posed by our secretary, who did double duty for us while she was at it. The story is by Edwin Benson, and is called "Priestess of the Floating Skull" which ought to intrigue you fantasy readers. It's such a smash story that we mention it specifically so you won't miss it. It's about . . . well, we can't even hint that, because we might spoil something . . . but hang it all, go out and get it when it appears March 10!

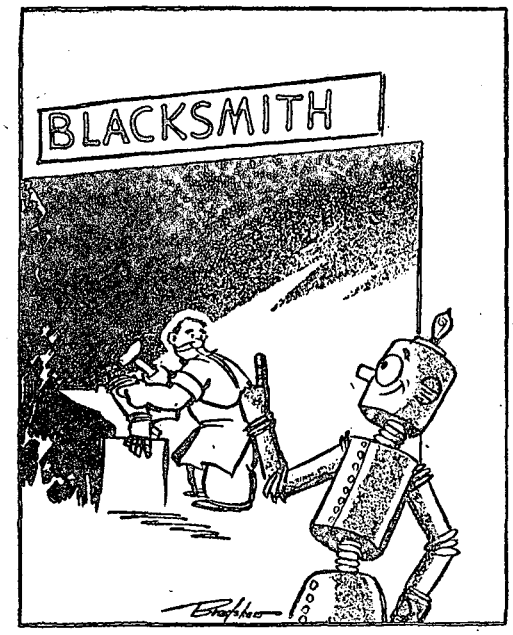
OUR sister magazine "Mammoth Detective" might almost look like a fantasy magazine to you readers, this month; because its cover features two leading fantasy writers—Nelson S. Bond and William P. McGivern. Which should mean nothing less to you than a guarantee of another magazine crammed full of fine entertainment.

THE other day a telegram arrived saying "expect me tomorrow." It was a thrill to us, because it was from Robert Moore Williams down in St. Louis. Every time Bob comes to town, it means not only a visit, but some swell manuscripts and some swell plot discussions. This time Bob arrived laden with two long manuscripts, one of which was intended for *Fantastic Adventures.* Bob modestly claims this story to be the best fantasy to appear in our magazine, or any other, and the best ever written. What else can we add to that except to say it'll be a good story, and we'll be happy to pass it on to you for your complete and joyous entertainment?

WILLIAM P. McGIVERN came in the other day walking on crutches! At first we thought it was a gag, and that all he wanted to make us forget was that he was overdue on a manuscript we asked him to write—or else to waggle a check out of us. Well, it wasn't a gag, although it did explain why the manuscript wasn't finished. Friend Bill is a *bad*minton player, if you get what we mean; and he sprained an ankle. Latest report is that even the crutches were to no avail, and the lad is in bed. These writers—can't even stand on their own feet! But seriously, Bill, we're sorry about your accident, and hope you'll be back with us soon. And we hope you'll be able to continue batting away on the typewriter in spite of the ankle! You see, the manuscript is a story based on a McCauley cover, perhaps one of the loveliest he's ever painted, and to brag a little, the story's not bad either—we gave Bill the plot out of our own little head. Tremendous stuff . . .

DON WILCOX is writing a serious-fiction novel of Kansas, and plans to put somewhere around 150,000 words down on paper before he finishes. Kansas is Don's native state. We predict Don will make a serious bid for recognition in book-stalls when this yarn is published!

(Continued on page 98)



"How about battin' me out a couple of blondes for Tuesday night?"

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CHILDREN OF THE

By THORNTON AYRE

The Golden Amazon and her two children were seeking the secret of life, and in an amazing scientific cavern they found it—but others sought the secret, too . . .

GOLDEN AMAZON

To be enslaved by the Mercutians was a terrible thing

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THE stranded space pilot paused at the edge of the little clearing and mopped his streaming face. Ahead of him stretched the same view he had encountered since he had landed in these sweltering Venusian Hotlands three hours before. . . . Trees, mightily tall, lushlike ground interlaced with vivid streams of color. And everywhere the overpowering, crushing heat and the gray, molten sky permitting a blinding shaft of sunlight ever and again. To an Earthman, unaccustomed to the planet, Venus was close to the gates of hell.

The pilot swore to himself, then at a sudden sound, the breaking of twigs underfoot, he swung round. For a moment he caught a brief vision of somebody in white, then the trees closed in again.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, there, wait a minute!"

He dived into the undergrowth and within a few minutes came unexpectedly upon a slender girl picking her way with surprising skill through the labyrinth. She was but lightly attired in a white frock which threw the perfection of her young figure into enchanting relief. Her hair was black as carbon dust; her eyes violet blue, a coloring enhanced by the smooth brownness of her skin everywhere it was exposed.

"This is—unexpected," she said in surprise, indulging in a scrutiny of her own and surveying the pilot's ruggedly chiseled face and strong figure in gray shirt and breeches.

"I'm Barry Waltham, United States Lines," he explained. "Something went wrong with my machine and— Well, I came down. But who in cosmos are you? As cool as icewater in this hellish dump!"

"I'm a survivor," she said, after a pause. "Since we'll need names, you can call me Dorothy Lake. The Trans-Saturn express crashed here three days ago and since then I have been living on fruit and hot water and trying to find my way to Hotlands Center. If I can once find it I'll be okay."

"Yeah . . ." Waltham's eyes traveled in some puzzlement over her immaculate attire. "Yes, I suppose so," he agreed. "But how do you know if you're headed in the right direction?"

She thrust forth her bronzed bare arm and he smiled ruefully as he saw the jeweled watch compass strapped round her wrist.

"Due west," she said. "I'm hoping to make it while this seven-twenty-hour-day lasts."

"Unarmed and alone?" he asked doubtfully. "It won't be any picnic. If the Hotlanders find you they'll prove pretty rough. Look, I've got a flame gun. How about us moving together?"

She shrugged. "Why not? I don't suppose that in this progressive age introductions are necessary. Come on. . . ."

They started off together and Waltham found himself hard put to it to keep up with the girl as she hurried on through the tangled wilderness. At last, exhausted, he called a halt. The girl nodded and relaxed against a tree, smiling rather oddly.

"Not in very good condition, are you?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, I don't know. I— Say, is that water over there?" Waltham broke off, staring through the undergrowth. "Yes, it is! I'll be back in a minute."

He was away some little time and when he returned he had no water in his flask. Instead he seemed to be settling his radio and provision equipment more firmly on his shoulders.

"I was wrong," he said, settling down again.

"Took you a long time to discover

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your mistake, didn't it?"

"Sorry. I went a bit further just to make sure. . . ."

The girl said nothing; then abruptly she stood up again.

"We're wasting useful daylight sitting here. Come on."

WITH a grunt Waltham rose and followed her. She seemed to be preoccupied all of a sudden for for the next two miles of vegetation-choked trail she said not a word—then at a sudden crackling of undergrowth from behind both she and Waltham swung round.

"Reach!" a voice ordered, and it was followed by the appearance of four grimy men from the vegetation, the leader holding a flame gun and the others bars of iron. They wore the dirty tropical rigout favored by rocket hands.

"Yeah," the leader said, eyeing Waltham, "I mean you—and the girl, whoever she is."

"She has nothing to do with it—"

"No?" Cold eyes swept the girl as she stood with her hands slightly raised. The leader went over to where she was standing, but he had hardly reached her before her hands dropped with lightning swiftness and settled about his wrists. With one savage movement she bent his gun hand backwards. He dropped the weapon with a scream of pain as his wrist bone snapped. But the girl didn't stop here. Still gripping his other wrist, she swung him round violently and then planted her right fist clean in his jaw. He dropped to the loam like a poleaxed bull and didn't get up again, either.

"What the—" Waltham twirled round and dived for the nearest man with a crowbar. For the next few minutes they were both at it hammer and tongs, and out of the corner of his eye Waltham caught a glimpse of the girl lashing out with stinging force.

First she knocked one man out, then picking up the crowbar she bent it into a U across her bronzed forearm. The effect of this was sufficient to send the remaining man scurrying into the undergrowth as fast as he could go. . . . Waltham made a last effort and knocked his own antagonist out, then he turned to the girl as she tossed the bar into the undergrowth.

"Who were those men?" she demanded, as they proceeded on their way again.

"They're chasing me. It's rather a long story and I've only one person to tell it to—that's the Golden Amazon. You've saved me a lot of trouble, you know. Of course, you're the Amazon's daughter, Hygiea? Nobody else could have inherited such strength."

The girl nodded her black head slowly.

"I didn't really crash," Waltham went on. "I came out of space in the usual way, because I want to find your mother. Of course, it is common knowledge throughout the System that she lives in the Hotlands here with you and your brother Hercules."

"Yes, that's true," Hygiea admitted. "My father was killed some five years ago in a space crash— But look here, did you meet me by accident or design?"

"Pure accident. I thought you *might* be the Amazon's daughter, but I wasn't sure until I saw you in action just now. Anyhow, I've got to see your mother."

"All right, you shall. I'm on my way home, as it is. I had just been to Hotlands Center to inquire after some mails due on the Martian express. . . . Here, this way. Mother never turned away a visitor yet, providing there is *real* reason for taking up her time, that is."

"There is!" Waltham said fervently. "Believe me!"

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IT WAS an hour later when, the girl leading the way, they came suddenly into a wide clearing. In it, surrounded by a high, wired inclosure—probably capable of being electrified—was a good-sized bungalow of the conventional Earth pattern. Waltham confessed to an inward surprise at seeing such a place in the Hotlands; then as he came nearer he noticed other details—the house was on stilts to preserve it from the periodic mud flows, and on the veranda there lounged a white-suited, black-haired young giant of perhaps twenty-two.

"My brother," the girl explained, as he rose and held out a muscular hand in greeting. "This is Mr. Waltham, Herc—here on a special mission. Mother busy?"

"Yes—but I'll fetch her."

He strode off and the girl led the way into the spacious living room with its earthly furniture. After a while a slender woman entered by the doorway at the far end of the room. Instantly Waltham's eyes traveled over her. She was tall, majestic, still young looking. Her violet blue eyes searched him.

"The—Golden Amazon?" he asked, shaking the amber-skinned hand she held out to him.

She smiled. "I used to be, but I am afraid that that legendary name died out eighteen years ago. What there is of the legend is perpetuated in my twin children here—Hygiea and Hercules, the Heavenly Twins, as some call them. . . . It's their show now. But I understand you have a special reason for seeking me out?"

"Yes. It's an odd story, and—"

"Then we'll discuss it over dinner. Pardon me."

The Amazon turned aside and pressed a button. It was not a servant who responded, but two robots. They soon had a perfect meal set out, and as it progressed Waltham began his story.

"I'm not just a wandering spaceman: I'm a special investigator with the Interplanetary Police. My latest assignment has been to look into peculiar happenings on the Twilight Belt of Mercury. We got to know that a band of scientific criminals were experimenting in human synthesis, and—"

"Synthesis?" the Amazon asked abruptly, glancing at the twins; then seeing Waltham's look of surprise, she gave an apologetic smile. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Waltham. It so happens that I am engaged on synthesis experiments, too, and—"

"I think I should amend my own statement to zombieism," Waltham said. "By that I mean that this gang is using a series of immensely powerful magnets from Mercury. These, aided by the immense drag of the sun from that quarter of space, are sufficient to pull aside any passenger liner near that zone. When the ship is dragged down the criminals fill it with gas. Afterwards they take the dead passengers—only gassed to death, remember, and therefore with all their organs intact—down into an underground laboratory and turn them into mindless zombies, blind slaves of anybody's will. . . .

"So far as I can make out, these zombies are then sold to Earth criminals who run what is equivalent to slave labor. It means that zombie servants will be everywhere in time. These scoundrels are making a fortune out of the most murderous racket ever conceived. I forgot to add that they alter the faces to make the zombies quite unrecognizable."

"I learned long ago that scientific criminals will do almost anything," the Amazon said, with a reminiscent smile. "But go on, Mr. Waltham. . . ."

"Well, I tracked down their hideout,

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but I had to depart in a hurry. Unfortunately I was seen. I knew when I was in space that I stood no chance of escaping them. My only hope was to head for the next nearest planet, Venus, and evade them. It was as I did this that it occurred to me that you might be able to help. Well, I landed—but even then I was followed and might even have been finished off but for the intervention of your daughter here."

HYGIEA nodded a silent confirmation as her mother glanced at her—then the Amazon looked rather puzzled.

"But, Mr. Waltham, can't you return to Earth and secure the necessary aid from the Interplanetary police?"

"And be killed on the way? No, I daren't risk it. Besides, I doubt if the police could do much: this is essentially a job for space-rovers—adventurers, if you prefer—like you and your son and daughter here."

"I think you had better leave me out of it," the Amazon said quietly. "I have this important synthetic experiment to make and—"

"But we can help!" Hercules exclaimed eagerly. "It's a job after our own heart, isn't it, Hy?"

The girl looked across at him and gave an excited nod.

"Suits me! It's a long time since we had any real fun— If you agree, Mother?"

The Amazon shrugged. "As you wish. I know how I used to feel when I heard the call of adventure."

"Come on, then!" Hercules exclaimed. "There's nothing to stop us getting on our way right now. The *Comet's* all stocked up ready for emergency. Let's go, Sis. . . ." Then as he clapped a huge hand on Waltham's shoulder he added, "I think that between the three of us these crooks are in for a rough time."

"I believe you're right," Waltham nodded, as they came out onto the veranda. . . .

The Amazon went to the doorway and stood watching them cross the clearing. Presently she saw the glittering bulk of the *Comet* rise from its hangar in a surge of exhaust sparks, circle once, then climb steadily to the dazzling gray sky.

Thoughtfully she relaxed against the door, staring before her long after the ship had vanished from sight. . . .

CHAPTER II

Grim Surprise

IN THE roomy control room of the *Comet,* Hercules set the course for Mercury, then he relaxed in the spring chair, Hygiea on one side of him and Waltham on the other.

"What sort of synthesis is your mother seeking?" Waltham asked presently. "Anything to do with that scientific empire she's planning, about which press and radio have had so much to say?"

"Everything to do with it," Hygiea answered. "She says that in Herc and I she has the most perfect male and female of the Earth species which it is possible to find. She wants an empire of beings like us, future rulers of the Universe, and intends to model synthetic beings to resemble us. But something is wrong somewhere and she can't make a synthetic being come to life. When she has solved that problem a cosmic Empire will become an established fact."

"A truly amazing woman," Waltham mused. Then suddenly he gave a start and gazed through the side port. "Say, we're being followed! Take a look!"

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Hercules and the girl looked round sharply. A small, unidentified flyer was rapidly overtaking them, flashing the yellow "Stop!" signal from its prow. Hercules gave a grim smile.

"Stop, eh? What does he think we are? He has no authority, no insignia, and we're *not* stopping."

"That ship may be powerfully armed, though," Waltham said anxiously. "Do you think it's safe to risk it?"

"Safe?" Hercules gave a grin and glanced across at his sister as she turned from the window.

"Are these the same gangsters who pursued you to Venus?" she demanded.

"Yes, but—"

"Don't worry any more," Hercules said, and seized the switches of the disintegrator gun in his big hands. "They've asked for this, and they're going to get it!"

With that he slammed in the switches and sent a stream of energy forth into the void. But the attacker was quicker and dodged the onslaught, releasing a stream of fire at the same time. The rear plates of the *Comet* became unbearably hot for a few moments, but, thanks to their special metallic composition, they did not liquefy.

Hercules tightened his lips, seized the gun controls again, and then as the girl swung the ship round in a huge arc and brought the pursuer right across the sights, he let all the switches in in one movement. Devastating force hit the vessel amidships and it blew apart, the two halves crumbling into molten metal.

Waltham stared fixedly at the ruins through the porthole. When he turned back again his face seemed oddly shocked.

"Well, you—you got them," he said, in a strange voice.

"Naturally," Hercules shrugged. "The machine that can beat ours hasn't been built yet—unless it be mother's *Ultra*."

"I suppose it would be a shock to you, not knowing the resistance of this vessel," Hygiea smiled. "However, that takes care of your enemies, Mr. Waltham. We have a clear course to Mercury now—or is it still necessary?"

"Oh, definitely!" he answered hurriedly. "Those men in that ship were only a few of the entire gang."

"Good!" Herc exclaimed. "I'd have been sorry if things were going to end so soon."

WALTHAM said nothing to that. He resumed his seat, and for some reason seemed to have little to say during the rest of the trip. . . . It was a wearying journey, too, with Hercules and the girl taking it in turn at the controls—but at last they were near enough to the erratic little planet to need their dark goggles. Here the sun filled all space with his naked heat and power, flooding little Mercury with eternal radiance on one side and perpetual dark on the other, except for the one spot which possessed a slight libration, known throughout the System as the Twilight Belt.

"Which way?" the girl asked sharply, needing all her skill to control the vessel against the mighty space warps created by the sun's field.

"Keep going," Waltham said. "I'll direct you."

From then on it was a tense job of maneuvering and following his orders. But little by little the *Comet* drew nearer, sweeping at last over titanic gulfs and seams, over powdered hurricanes of yellow pumice dust, over bubbling morasses of molten metals, and so at last to the frowning ridges of the mountains marking the Twilight Belt. There were incredible spires, warped and twisted with eternal heat and cold,

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lightning playing about their summits incessantly.

Swiftly Hygiea brought the machine into the valley which Waltham indicated. They came to rest at last in darkest shadows, relieved only by the pearly glow of the sun's corona or else the livid vermilion of a prominence as it licked from the sun over the mountain range. . . . But there was air—thin, but still air. The tremors of it were visible.

"Well, what now?" Hercules asked, rising.

"The spot we want is a little way down this valley," Waltham replied. "I suggest you come with me and study the layout, then we can decide on what weapons we'll need. We shan't need space suits, by the way. Air extends for twenty-five miles round the Twilight Belt. It's pretty thin, but breathable. Come on."

The two nodded and clambered outside. Then Hercules went back for special boots. Wearing these they could adjust themselves to the ridiculous gravity and thereby walk in relative comfort.

"There—down that cleft," Waltham said presently, and led the way into an abysmal darkness. In some wonder the two followed him, surprised to find that rough steps had been made in the rock, leading constantly downwards.

At last they reached a complete tunnel leading still downwards. Waltham went ahead cautiously, flashing his torch, until finally he came to a massive door. Joining him, Hercules and the girl both noticed that subsidiary tunnels—two of them—converged at this door as well.

"Keep your lights off," Waltham cautioned, as he finally succeeded in getting a responsive click out of the door lock.

THEY all moved into the dark and there was a sudden sharp sound. Something brushed past Hercules and Hygiea and to one side of them two glowing tubes came into life. They could make out the outlines of machinery— Then light gushed abruptly upon them and they saw for the first time that they were in the midst of a perfectly equipped scientific laboratory.

"What the—" Hercules began, then with a sudden shock of alarm he realized he could not move his hands. In fact no part of his body at all. He just stood where he was. He glanced sharply at the girl.

"Yes—me too," she said.

"I suppose," Waltham said, turning from a switchboard, "that this is a most unpleasant surprise? You see, the criminal mind—so called—behind the abduction of bodies from space ships happens to be me! I invented the story of being a special agent in order to get you out here. Good psychology, don't you think? Also, those men who attacked me on Venus were ordered to do it by me. They were my assistants. You remember, Hygiea, when after we had first met I went to look for water and you asked me why I had been so long? That was when I radioed my position to them. Unfortunately they overdid it by attacking us in space, and you wiped them out. I hadn't expected that. It leaves me to work alone, but I think I can handle it. These paralysing rays are very effective, even against such strength as you two possess."

"Well, what the hell do you want with us?" Hercules demanded.

"I'll tell you. See here . . ."

Waltham pressed a switch and a steel door swung open to the accompaniment of an icy blast of air. Beyond, brightly lighted, and obviously refrigerated, were rows of men and

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women lying in bunks, still dressed in the clothes in which they had died. In all there were perhaps two score of them.

"Gassed," Waltham explained calmly. "But I have explained that already. Now, thanks to you two, they can be made to live again as zombies and I can send them to Earth for a good price."

"What has that to do with us?" Hygiea snapped.

"I'm coming to that. You see, to make these men and women live again I need a man and woman of superhuman strength—which both of you possess. My method, which I proved to be correct, is to transfer the strength of each of you to ten men and ten women respectively. I know that, like your mother, your individual strength is ten times normal. At the end of the life-transfusion you will each have the strength of a normal human being—but if I choose to go one beyond that you will have no strength left at all. In plain words you'll—die."

The two were silent, grim faced, but Waltham could see their muscles straining to break the crushing paralysis of the rays trained upon them.

"You see," Waltham added, "bodily energy is an actual life force, and with my apparatus it can be transferred in the form of so many life energy volts. You will see what I mean fast enough in a moment."

HE PICKED up a tiny, but powerful force ray, and lifted Hygiea aloft. He carried her body to a huge machine, hung her suspended in midair at the center of a huge electrode. Hercules watched in quivering, passive fury, but he noticed Waltham stood outside the range of the beams to perform his job. Still watching, Hercules saw the girl struggling with demonic force as the effect of the paralysis beam left her. Carefully Waltham removed the girl's clothes, and as her gleaming body was revealed, a fine spray of oil came from spray-nozzles and covered her body, so that she looked like a living statue. Her arms outspread in a helpless gesture, and Waltham's rays held her that way as he trained them now on her to hold her still. Then he pulled a switch—

Hygiea's arms and legs began to change color slowly, become a lovely silvery, metallic color, but somehow icy, more than metallic. An expression of horror came over Hygiea's face, and something of pain.

"The oil," said Waltham softly, "prevents the burning that comes with freezing . . ."

"You can't do this!" she shouted fiercely. "You can't—"

Waltham only smiled and took off his coat deliberately. Then he went over to the refrigerating chamber.

"Herc!" the girl screamed, turning her eye vainly. "Herc, do something—!"

"I'm trying to!" he retorted, his voice hoarse with effort. He watched Waltham as he busied about in the depths of the refrigerator room—then deliberately allowing his knees to give way Herc fell over. His strategy was correct, for on the floor he lay just under the deadly paralysing beams with his strength surging back to him. Slowly he wormed his way to the clear area, stood up, then waited with clenched fists outside the door of the refrigerator room.

At last Waltham came out with the corpse of a woman in his arms. He had about two seconds to realize what had happened, then a fist of steel struck him in the jaw. It was a stupendous blow, with all Herc's anger and superhuman strength behind it. Waltham

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dropped his burden, staggered backwards and crashed helplessly against the wall, blood streaming from his lip.

Herc did not even waste time feeling for his flame gun. He hurled himself forward, lifted Waltham in one hand and hurled him into the refrigerator, slamming the door upon him— Then he dashed across to Hygiea. For a moment the switches baffled him, then he pulled them open. Slowly Hygiea's limbs regained their normal color—evidently only her skin had been affected. Hercules lowered her to the floor with the beam, and helped her resume her clothes.

"What now?" the girl asked anxiously. "From the noise going on inside that refrig you didn't put Waltham completely to sleep. He may even have a way of opening that door from the inside—"

"We're going back to Earth," Herc interrupted. "We need some help before we can smash a racket like this. Come on!"

They went across to the door, yanked it open and hurried up the dark staircase outside. Then at the top, as they came into the tunnel, Herc paused.

"Say, do you remember there were three sets of stairways? I wonder if we took the right one in our hurry?"

The girl flashed on her torch. "No means of telling at the moment. Keep on and see what happens."

They kept on all right, but they came no nearer to the valley from which they had started. After wandering through the tunnels for a seeming age they came to a stop again.

"I guess we're lost all right," Herc said grimly. "Yet, all the tunnels must surely lead out to the open some place— Try a bit further."

HYGIEA nodded and advanced again, then as nothing of importance showed itself in the torch light she began to nearly run through the twisting underworld—until quite unexpectedly they came to a tunnel branching at right angles exactly across their own.

"Now what?" she asked, looking to either side.

Herc frowned in the torchlight. "I still insist they must come out on the surface, and from the feel of the draft we are still in the Twilight Belt region. Suppose we try opposite tunnels?"

"Sounds to me like the surest way to part for ever."

"Not at all. Mark the wall as you go. It gives us a double chance of finding the way out, anyhow. The first one to find it will come back here and wait for the other. How's that?"

"Right," the girl nodded, and with a rather uneasy smile she started off down the lefthand tunnel. Herc watched her go, then switching on his own torch he went off to the right.

The tunnel seemd to go ahead of him for miles, certainly to the limit of his torchbeam. Steadily he went on . . . Then all of a sudden he heard a scream, a girl's scream, as though from an infinite distance. It went echoing into the silences and almost immediately afterwards he heard, very faintly,

"Herc! *Herc—!*"

Instantly he spun round and raced back the way he had come. But the unexpected happened. In landing from a jump his heavy boots thumped into a piece of crumbled rock flooring. Thin as pumice it gave way under the shock and sent him tumbling downwards, feet first thanks to his boots.

He landed with a jarring shock some fifty feet below.

Getting to his feet he shook his lamp back into life. Down here, much nearer to the bowels of Mercury, the character of things had changed. There were no

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passages. This was a part of a giant inner cavern filled with a scorching wind which seemed to prove it had a connection somewhere with the sunward side.

But it was the remembrance of Hygiea's cry which sent Herc hurrying forward desperately. It seemed to be only too evident that Waltham had come on the scene again and recaptured her—

Then Herc paused again, listening intently.

CHAPTER III

Master of Zombies

THERE were new sounds now in this crazy underworld. It reminded him of the wailing of Venusian jungle beasts or else the ceremonial rites performed by some of the still unextinct savages of Earth.

For a moment or two he stood still, focusing the noise, then he began to move swiftly towards it. It became louder and louder—then all at once he burst upon a scene such as he had never imagined possible outside the Circle of Dante.

He had come into another cavern, a truly vast one, at the far end of which was a flickering fire. Round it, like demons out of hell, were creatures startlingly similar to giant Earth grasshoppers, standing upright, moving about in the semblance of a dance with their tentaculate hands holding to each other. And as they danced they chanted . . .

This in itself was shock enough on a world thought to be devoid of life, but Herc was infinitely more shocked when he caught sight of the reason for all this crazy ceremony— For he suddenly caught sight of Hygiea in the midst of the circle, tied firmly to an upright stake, her mouth gagged and her eyes fearfully watching the insanity around her.

In the flickering firelight Herc could see the terror and revulsion in her expression as ever and again the leader of the dancing circle reached out his claw and laid it on top of her head. He kept it there for a moment or two and then resumed the dance. Obviously the action was all part of the ritual.

"Devils!" Herc breathed, worming out of the shadows with his flamegun ready for action. He was just about ready to blast the nearest Mercutians in pieces when he was suddenly seen. The dancing stopped, just as the leader had again placed his hand on the girl's head.

Herc waited tensely—then a piece of rock sailed from somewhere and knocked the flamegun out of his hand. He did not hesitate a moment longer. Diving forward he seized the nearest Mercutian in his hands— But here again he ran up against the unexpected. The moment he grabbed the creature he received a distinct electric shock, and at the same time a torrent of unspoken words in his brain. They were from Hygiea!

"Herc, take care! These creatures are electrical, natural amplifiers of thought waves— As long as my head is in contact with the Mercutian's hand and you are holding one of the creatures in the unbroken chain you receive my thoughts—"

The contact broke suddenly as the leader removed his hand from the girl's head and turned to study Herc. There was a sudden menacing movement—but Herc was ready for it. Turning, he lashed out with a tremendous fist and struck the Mercutian he had been holding a terrific blow in his hideous face. His retaliation was just as swift for Herc felt electric force stream through him with such violence it slammed him

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to his knees.

Nor did he get the chance to recover himself for by the time the shock had passed the Mercutians were piling all over him, releasing new electric currents which made him gasp. Strong ropes, made of some metallic material, tightened about his wrists and ankles and bound him immovably. A second stake was propped up beside Hygiea and he was dragged over to it and secured upright alongside her. Then talking was prevented as a piece of spongy rock was thrust in his mouth and bound into place tightly.

AGAIN the crazy ceremony began, only this time the leader had two heads to touch. It was astonishing to the twins how their thoughts instantly interchanged through the electric medium of he Mercutian's body. Hygiea only read disgust and alarm in her brother's mind, so being the more practical of the two she busied herself with sending a further message.

"These beings overtook me in one of the tunnels. From what they have told me—by thought transmission—they are a kind of animated electricity, a condition engendered by this whole planet being impregnated with vast solar fields. . . . They are totally immune to the effects of heat or cold and can go with equal ease to. . . ."

There was an interval, then the girl resumed,

"And can go to either sunward or nightward surface without harm. So far as I have been able to make out they have a legend — something about the coming of a queen and her consort from the cosmos. When both of them are sacrificed to the Fire God—the sun, I presume—the Mercutians will be given dominion over all the universe. Pure heathen reasoning—but deadly reasoning as far as we are concerned."

"Decidedly so," Herc's thoughts replied; then communication was again broken between them as the leader removed his hands. In fact there was every evidence of a change in the ritual . . .

Gathering to the rear the electrical beings congregated behind the two stakes and heaved with all their strength. The two pillars came out of their supports, were tipped horizontal, and then carried along with Herc and Hygiea face upward upon them, pulling and struggling with all their strength.

And here, Herc realized, there was something of an advantage—an advantage which perhaps his superior male strength could seize. Before, only sheer forward muscular effort had been possible to break his bonds, but now he was flat on his back he had the absurdly slight gravity to aid him. Tensile effort upward on such a planet should be easy. So he began to gather the strength of his arms and massive shoulders for a supreme effort. The girl, noting what was coming, turned her head towards him and watched anxiously.

It took Herc some time to gather the necessary tension for the effort, but when he was ready he abruptly threw all his power into a supreme strain. There was a rending and snapping as the metallic bonds broke apart. His shoulders and arms came free: instantly he forced his feet apart and snapped the ankle fetters— With a bump he fell down into the dust.

Instantly there was a concerted rush upon him, but this time he was prepared for it. Steeling himself against the electric shocks he lashed out with devastating force. Two of the hideous Mercutians went smashing backwards with broken necks. At this the others lowered the girl and her stake and came

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over to force the struggle . . .

But, mysteriously, Hercules had gone. Hygiea stared at the shadows desperately but failed to see him—then she heard his voice from the far end of the cavern.

"Hang on, Sis—I'll be back. I've got to get help. If these brutes take you to the sunward side don't forget to keep your eyes closed!"

Then he was gone, and the Mercutians after a fruitless search came back to the girl. Again she was hoisted upon her stake on the creatures' shoulders. Every effort she had made in those few precious moments to release herself had failed . . . But she knew Herc would keep his word. If he didn't—

But that was a thought too horrible to contemplate as she was borne onwards through the gathering darkness of the main tunnel leading from the cavern . . .

CERTAINLY HERC had a definite plan in mind: the point that troubled him most was whether he'd be able to put it into operation in time, for once she was taken to the sunward side there was no knowing how long Hygiea would be able to hold out against burns and blindness. Everything depended on one thing—finding Waltham again and finding him alive. After that. . . .

But the problem to Herc right now was retracing his way. He came back finally to the hole in the tunnel floor through which he had fallen. It looked impossible to get up that fifty feet to the top. Yet the sides were rough. If he took off his weighted boots he might, with the little gravity, have a toe and finger hold—

He had no sooner thought of it than he acted. Discarding his boots he leapt with all his strength; then the moment he reached the limit he thrust downwards with his feet against the side wall and so went up higher again — constantly, in a succession of muscle breaking leaps, until at last he emerged over the edge of the hole through which he had fallen.

"Stay right where you are!"

He twisted round at the command, and immediately the glare of a flashlamp flooded into his face. In the beam he saw the glitter of a gun and beyond it a dim, indeterminate figure.

"Waltham!" he breathed, and his heart gave a leap of joy at the thought of how much time and trouble Waltham's advent had saved him.

"Surprised?" Waltham asked dryly. "You shouldn't be. You left enough footmarks in the dust of the tunnels to guide a blind man. It was a toss up at first whether I followed your footprints or your sister's. Then I heard sounds this way as you climbed up this shaft—Get up on your feet!"

"Okay, you win," Herc growled, and made no attempt to resist as Waltham clamped his wrists behind him with steel manacles. Then, stumbling in the slight gravity, he went forward with the flamegun in the small of his back.

"Where *is* your sister?" Waltham snapped presently.

"I don't know. Since we parted at the tunnel intersection I haven't seen her."

"Well she can't get far on this damned planet. I'll find her quick enough once I've settled with you. And I'll take it out of you for locking me in that refrigerator room, too. I had to smash the apparatus to get out an electrical tube and so burn away the lock. . . . Go on, keep moving!"

In ten minutes they were back in the laboratory, each watching the other warily.

"You're taking this very calmly," Waltham remarked presently, with a touch of suspicion.

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Herc shrugged. "I know when I'm licked, I guess—and I'm not fool enough to give myself a date with that flamegun of yours."

"Get on that table!" Waltham snapped.

HERC hesitated for the briefest instant, and then he complied. The buckled straps closed about him—new ones replacing those he had smashed in releasing Hygiea—and to them was added thin but immensely strong chain. Herc's lips compressed as he observed this: he realized more clearly than ever that if his plan failed in its objective those chains would beat him. And Hygiea? Desperation forced words to his lips.

"Well, how the devil much longer are you going to be?"

Waltham gave a grim smile and went over to the refrigerator. In a few minutes he had placed a dead man on the table adjoining Herc's. Then he began to arrange a series of electrodes from Herc's arm to that of the corpse. A switch closed: an array of electric appartus began to hum deeply: tubes came to life . . . Waltham, his eyes on a graduated wheel, began to operate a series of dials. . . .

Herc set his teeth at the pain that gripped him from head to foot as life energy was dragged out of him. The strain was immense, produced cramp in every limb, and he could feel his strength d i m i n i s h under the onslaught. . . .

Then at last the dead man on the adjoining table twitched gently. Instantly Waltham shut the power off.

"Get up!" he commanded.

There was no response from the corpse.

"Get up!" Waltham thundered, coming closer. "Get up, I say!"

Still the corpse did not respond. Herc waited urgently. On the next happenings depended his whole scheme.

"Get up!" Waltham cried passionately, and instantly Herc concentrated on the same order. His heart leapt as the "dead" man rose slowly and got up from the table.

"It works!" Waltham breathed, his eyes gleaming. "He obeys my will! They'll all obey my will! You see that, Hercules?"

Herc gave a crooked smile and as Waltham commanded the zombie to walk into a corner Herc repeated the order mentally and watched the man obey to the letter. . . .

Walthan laughed — the exultant laugh of a scientist who thinks he has smashed the last barrier to a great achievement. . . . Five, six-eight times he brought out male corpses and subjected Herc to that exquisite anguish each time—and each time Herc found that the living zombie obeyed his will and not Waltham's, despite Waltham's belief to the contrary.

But the strain was terrific. At the end of the eight life-energy transfusions Herc realized how weak he had become—weak in comparison to his normal giant strength anyway, and still strong even relative to a normal man.

Just the same he realized it was time to call a halt before he was too exhausted physically and mentally to put his plan in action, so this time when Waltham went across to the refrigerator room he watched intently until he was out of view, then forcing up his head against the straps about his neck he fixed his gaze on the dead faces of the zombies against the wall.

"Kill him!" he commanded mentally. "Kill! *Kill!*"

WITHOUT a second's hesitation, directed by his thoughts, they advanced towards the refrigerator room.

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At that very moment Waltham appeared with another corpse in his arms. In one glance he took in the menace of the advancing men, and tossing the corpse on the floor he yanked out his flamegun and fired. The shaft burned through clothes and flesh, but it did not stop the advance.

Waltham hesitated, confused. He licked his lips and shouted a hoarse order.

"Stop! Stop, I tell you! I *order you to stop!*"

"Kill!" Herc shouted. "Kill him! *Kill!*"

Waltham saw the expressionless, implacable faces all around him. He dropped his gun and made a dash to get away—but fingers of iron clamped round his throat, drew tight, and tighter. He fell to his knees, struggling uselessly, his brain swimming.

At last the zombie who had done the deed released him, let his dead body slip to the floor.

"Here!" Herc shouted. "Come and break these chains! Unfasten these straps. . . ."

Dead white hands got to work and released him. He slid off the table, got a grip on himself as a deadly faint seized him for a moment. He felt worn out. . . .

"You . . . you will follow me," he stated, straightening up. "Come this way."

Picking up Waltham's flamegun and torch he headed for the door with the zombies right behind him. Once beyond the door he spent a considerable time making sure of his surroundings, finally deciding that the center staircase was the one down which he and Hygiea had come at first. He hurried up it and flashed his torch beam around. His eyes gleamed as ahead of him he saw a ragged opening set with cold stars.

"This way!" he cried, and raced forward in gargantuan leaps. In a few minutes he had come to the rocky valley floor where, a short distance away, the *Comet* still stood. He made for it in enormous strides, the zombies following mechanically in the rear. At length they had blundered into the control room and stood motionless around him as he operated the controls.

Swiftly he climbed to three hundred feet and headed for the writhing prominences visible over the mountain range. In one upward sweep he crossed the summits and the full glare of the awful sun smote upon him.

He cried out huskily and flung an arm over his eyes; gradually the pain and sea of green before his vision abated. Taking good care to avoid the direct glare he stared earnestly below. Hygiea had said the sunward side. In that case the Mercutians ought to have carried her here by now.

But for the moment there was no sign of them. Below was the yellow plain, swept by the cyclonic winds. Yellow dust, fine pumice ground from rocks long since blasted to powder by incessant heat, was everywhere; and here and there crisscrossing the waste, channels of molten metal boiled and bubbled dangerously. Death—scorching, blinding death — reigned down there . . .

CHAPTER IV

Problems Solved

SUDDENLY Herc's heart gave a jump. Emerging from the shadow of a mile-distant cliff were a number of fantastic figures, and in the midst of them a scantily clad girl in white bound to a stake. The party was moving deliberately toward a cairn of rocks full in the eye of the monstrous sun.

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"Swine!" Herc breathed, passion sweeping him—and with a violent jerk he sent the *Comet* hurtling down in a huge arc. He found as he swept over the party, however, that his hopes of using the *Comet's* guns were false. He'd be very likely to hit the girl herself if he did that—so he turned aside and landed the vessel in a cloud of saffron dust about half a mile from the cairn.

Intently he watched through the port and saw the mad looking Mercutians come to a halt for a moment and look in his direction—then evidently dismissing him as innocuous they continued the procession. Herc still waited, until at last he saw the party had reached the top of the hill and were busy imbedding the stake in the rocks with the girl still secured to it.

Herc swung round to the zombies.

"These are your orders," he snapped, looking each in the eyes in turn. "You are to destroy those creatures out there by any means you wish—but *not* the girl. They will try and attack you and— I guess I'm forgetting you're dead men," he added grimly. "So carry on! On your way!"

He opened the airlock for them, and without a glance to left or right they marched outside into the burning dust, sank ankle deep in it. Herc watched fascinatedly through his dark goggles as the trousers about the creatures' ankles smoldered away. He reached straight away for protective lead boots and slipped them on. Then, flamegun in hand, he stepped outside into the scorching quagmire. For a moment he gasped at the burning furnace which hit him. He staggered, got a grip on himself, and then went on. In a few minutes he had caught up with the zombies. Keeping well behind them he still dinned the same order into their brains. . . .

Presently they left the hot ash plain and reached the stony ground at the base of the cairn. From here Herc could see that Hygiea was struggling violently, chiefly to turn her face away from the incredible glare of the sun. The Mercutians were in a circle about the stake, watching Herc's approach—and suddenly they all sprang at once.

Instantly Herc fired into the midst of them, but as he had half expected he only got two of them before the rest overwhelmed him. With his immense diminution of strength he simply had not the power to fight back. His goggles were knocked off his face, his flamegun snatched away, and a terrific electric shock sent him reeling on the scorching stones.

With the zombies it was different. They attacked with the blind, implacable fury of machines, undeterred by the electric shocks streaming through them time and time again. Swiftly the battle assumed hectic proportions.

DESPITE all his efforts Herc found himself handicapped by lack of strength. He got up, fought back, administered violent punishment indeed, but the incessant electricity racking his body brought him low again at last. Hardly aware of what was happening, so dazed was he, he found himself being bound and then dragged across the stones to be tied to the stake back to back with Hygiea.

He caught a glimpse of her hopeless face as she peered at him through slitted eyes—and he saw too that there was every reason for her despondency for the zombies too had been overpowered and were in the process of being fastened with metallic fiber. In the end all eight of them lay stretched face upward on the stones, struggling futilely and with increasing weakness.

This done, the Mercutians gathered

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in a circle and performed a brief ceremonial dance—then came a short telepathic message—

"The sacrifice is complete!"

With that the Mercutians began to depart up the stony trail until they were lost to sight in the surging, dust-choked wind. Even the *Comet* was out of sight too, hidden in a semi-opaque yellow blanket.

"At least they didn't gag me," Herc said, and by a supreme effort he managed to stretch his fingers far enough to clench the girl's hand. Rather unexpectedly he found her answering in space-Morse by the pressure of her fingers.

"How did you get hold of these zombies?"

"I worked on a hunch. I figured that since their life was really part of mine their mental processes ought to have a similar contact. I was right. They obeyed me implicitly, even to killing Waltham. I felt sure they would be able to aid me in wiping out the Mercutians and rescuing you. Instead—Well, I guess we're in the hell of a mess. Another hour here and we'll be dead. If not that then blind and mad with thirst. Blast these crazy Mercutians and their cockeyed ceremonial rites! But for them we'd have everything straight again—"

Herc broke off and struggled again frantically.

"I've got to get free!" he panted. "I've just *got* to! The ship is hidden just behind those dust clouds. If we could only reach it . . ."

He pulled and strained until his flesh was bleeding and sweat was rolling off him in streams. Then he had to give up from sheer physical exhaustion. He twisted his head and saw the girl was moving feebly, raising her face ever and again to the naked sun glaring over the near horizon.

"Don't do that!" Herc roared. "Don't let that sun fascinate you! I know it can do it, even on Venus. It's like hypnosis—It'll blind you! Destroy you!"

"Does it matter?" asked her tapping fingers. "There's no way out of this. It dries your skin, shrivels your bones, sweats you dry. I've been propped up here longer than you. . . . I know. It's no use, Herc. Look at the zombies! If it even finishes them off, only filled with false life, what won't it do to us?"

SHE ceased communicating, and from the sudden slackness of her body and dropped head Herc felt sure she had fainted. He was sure of it when she made no response to him calling her name. In a way he was glad: it had stopped her succumbing to that insane longing to stare the sun in the eye and watch eternal darkness close down forever.

Then something attracted his attention. It was a feeling of gathering strength! He could sense it surging through him as though he had taken a stiff dose of restorative. . . . For a while he was puzzled. He should be feeling weaker, not stronger—then his screwed up eyes fell on the nearest of the zombies. The creature had gone back to the death from which he had been revived. Therefore— Herc's eyes gleamed. There must be an eternal life current contact between himself and the creatures to whom he had been forced to loan his immense strength. In that event the expiry of the creature caused the strength loaned to return.

So he tried his bonds again, but it still wasn't any use. He waited in a fever of impatience.

With awful slowness, as it seemed to him, the zombies died one by one. So

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far as he could make out it was dehydration which killed them, the total evaporation of whatever water remained in their wasted bodies, an infinitely less proportion than that in a normal living being, of course.

In thirty minutes of anguishing, searing torture three more had died. Herc found it hard to keep his senses. From the rate he was sweating at he realized he too was in danger of dehydration . . .

Another ten minutes passed. Torturing thirst, tearing headache, but a feeling of immense muscular power. Herc opened his blistered eyelids. All eight zombies had ceased to breathe!

By sheer will power he forced himself to an effort, strained with every vestige of his strength. There was a sudden snap and his chest and arms came free. Forgetful of his aches and pains now he worked at top speed on the rest of his bonds and in ten seconds had freed himself completely. In a moment he had the gag out of Hygiea's mouth, tore apart the wires holding her, and let her limp form drop into his arms.

Intently he stared along the dusty stone trail towards the ash plain edge where he had left the *Comet*. He still could not see the vessel because of the swirling dust, but— He gave a start. In the cracked, barren gray of the cliff face a little way off figures moved—

Mercutians!

Far from leaving their victims to the sacrifice they had evidently stayed nearby to watch the outcome of their handiwork. Herc stood trying to decide what to do. He had intended going back along the stone trail, but the Mercutians were between him and the spaceship. The only other course was to risk the ash-field. He had his protective boots, of course, and he had managed it before, but now with the extra weight of Hygiea there was no telling what might happen.

HE HAD to risk it: suddenly he made up his mind to it. Holding the girl tightly to him he turned and raced for the yellow ash plain with the Mercutians now right behind him. His first plunge into the ash brought him up to his knees and for a ghastly second he thought he'd landed in some kind of red hot quicksand. But he had touched solidity, for the moment anyway, with the deadly stuff only two inches from the top of his boots.

Eyes and skin smarting with burns and bewildering sunlight he staggered on a little way and then looked behind him. He had cause to be grateful for one thing, anyhow. The ash-field had stopped the advance of the devilish denizens of Mercury.

He grinned through cracked lips and went on again in floundering movements. When he looked back again some time later the Mercutians had vanished. It puzzled him. Not like them to give up a chase so easily.

Wearily he went on, and presently Hygiea revived and gave a little moan. Her sudden movement made Herc stagger for a moment, then with his heart thumping with fright he steadied himself again.

"Herc!" The girl's voice was dry and harsh. "Where are we? What's happened?"

Briefly he recounted events since she had fainted.

"Soon be safe now," he added thankfully. "The *Comet's* just behind this dust screen on the edge of the ash plain, under the face of that cliff—"

He stopped dead and the girl felt him tense in sudden alarm.

"What?" she asked breathlessly. "I—I can't see so well. I'm dazzled. . . ."

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Herc stared at the rifts in the blinding dust. A stupefied look came to his face.

"It's gone!" he whispered in dismay. "Yet I *know* that is where I left it!"

He plunged forward again as fast as he could go and in a few more minutes staggered free of the ash-field proper onto the stony ground edging it. He set the girl on her feet and she clung to his arm as he hurried forward.

"Look!" He pointed suddenly. "There is the track the ship gouged when she landed!"

"Only one explanation," Hygiea said at last, thinking. "Do you remember how easily the Mercutians carried us, those heavy stakes as well? Maybe the slight gravity makes them like ants, and every bit as strong. Even on earth ants carry many times their own weight. With the slight gravity there is here that would make the *Comet* an easy matter. . . ." She stopped, biting her lip. "It begins to look to me as though we're finished."

"We can't be!" Herc retorted. "We haven't got to be!"

He looked about him desperately, still hoping in his heart to see some sign of the vessel—but his hope was not realized. There was nothing but the harsh shingle and blinding escarpment of cliffs—

BUT far above them was the unexpected. Mercutians! Dozens of them, watching. Or were they just watching? They seemed to be busy with something just out of sight. Herc stared anxiously, Hygiea clinging to his arm—then abruptly the danger was obvious to them as a series of immense rocks came tumbling down towards them. Before they had a chance to dodge the bolders had struck them and knocked them flying. Had earthly gravity been in force nothing could have saved them from being utterly crushed. As it was they were pinned down, even more so as further bolders came bouncing on top of them, but neither of them was injured.

"Of all the dirty, murdering scum!" Herc breathed, fighting to free himself. "I'll—"

"Herc! Herc!" It was a cry from Hygiea. Herc twisted his head round and saw that she was buried to the waist not a yard away from him. But upon her legs and feet was a load of frightening proportions.

"Coming," he answered grimly, and threw all the power of his body into freeing himself.

The bolders around him shifted and craunched under the force of his muscles. Two rocked aside. Another giant nearly fell on top of him. He held it at arm's length and shoved mightily until it rolled sullenly out of harm's way. Slowly, barking his knees and elbows, he fought free.

Immediately he turned to the girl, then something else caught his attention—the sight of blobs of molten metal dropping to the stones and bubbling near him. He stared upwards. Sheer horror rooted him for the moment as he beheld several of the Mercutians holding a massive caldron between them. It was tilted slightly forward so that drops of it fell below. What would happen if the full flood were released needed no guesswork. Obviously the murderous devils had obtain the stuff from one of the countless lava morasses.

"Herc!" Hygiea screamed suddenly, staring upward. "Look what they're doing! Quick—get me out!"

He dived for her, caught her beneath the arms and pulled hard. But all his strength was unavailing. Those rocks had effectually pinned the lower half of her body.

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"Move them!" she shouted desperately. "Hurry!"

Then she gave a little cry of pain as a droplet of the molten metal fell on her bare shoulder and raised an instant blister.

This was sheer diabolical torture. The Mercutians knew full well that the girl was trapped face upwards so she could not fail to see what was going on. Every second was an agony, waiting for the devilish impulse which would decide the creatures to drop the whole mass of liquid metal down. And that would mean death of the most anguishing kind. . . .

All these thoughts were flying through Herc's brain as he pulled away boulders and stones as fast as he could go. Drops of molten matter were falling on his back and shoulders with ever increasing frequency. . . .

In five minutes he had got rid of the smaller bolders and then came to the main one pinning the girl down. It was truly massive, large enough to crush an elephant on Earth. Again and again Herc shoved at it but it would not budge. Another huge effort set his feet slipping in the stones. Furiously he hurled his massive shoulder against it, to recoil half numbed.

"Do something!" Hygiea shrieked, squirming. "I can see them getting ready to tip that caldron—!"

HERC glanced up again and saw that the creatures had brought the caldron much nearer to the edge of the cliff. They were quite obviously preparing for more decisive action.

"I can't shift this damned stone," Herc panted. "I can't—"

"You've got to! It's crushing me! Oh, Herc, hurry up—!"

He put his back against it and dug his heels into the ground, shoved until he could shove no more. But it was no use. Gasping for breath he looked above, following the line of his sister's horrified gaze. The Mercutians had gathered in considerable numbers at the edge of the cliff now and had not one but several rough crucibles. The contents of all of them would soak the area below in lava for half a mile and more.

Herc swung round.

"It's no use, Hy, we can't get out of this. All I can do is cover you with stones and trust to luck that—"

He broke off, his eyes attracted for a moment by a flash of light in the violet sky.

"What's that?" he asked sharply, and the girl stared fixedly through half closed eyes. Before she could answer the flash had come again and remained permanent, resolving itself into a spaceship sweeping down in a breath-taking power dive.

"The *Ultra!*" Hygiea shrieked. "It's mother! Nobody else in the system could make a power dive like that—"

She broke off, speechless for the moment. The Mercutians had seen the ship, too, now, and were watching it intently, their immediate schemes for the caldrons forgotten.

Then the *Ultra* swept low enough for the portholes to be seen. At the same instant all six molten metal crucibles lifted magically into the air, hanging to an invisible line beneath the ships belly.

"She's using magnetic anchors!" Herc yelled. "Is that something—!"

He broke off again, watching earnestly. The Mercutians were obviously alarmed, milling up and down to escape the *Ultra* as it came sweeping back. Suddenly the caldrons dropped again, turning over as they fell through space. They fell far enough behind the cliff edge to miss the two below, but from the yells and screams which

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followed it was obvious that many of the creatures had been drenched in the stuff.

NOR did it end with that. The ship circled again, blazing forth its deadly yellow disintegrator ray. With that queer streak of ruthlessness which had always marked her character when fighting an enemy, the Amazon went back and forth, picking off every stray Mercutian she could find, even those who sought to escape down the cliff face whom she blew to pieces.

Then at last she brought the vessel down in a long arc to the shingle. The airlock opened.

"Mother!" Herc and Hygiea cried simultaneously. "Come here quick! This rock. . . ."

There seemed to be a faintly amused smile on her face as she hurried forward.

"I think," she said seriously, as she surveyed the pinned girl and Herc's obvious exhaustion, "that you have both a lot to learn yet in space exploring. It seems that you have made the mistake your father was always making. I constantly told him never to turn his back on an enemy. You're always safe if you don't. . . ."

She broke off and pressed her shoulder against the massive rock, waving Herc aside as he moved to assist her. In silent wonder he watched the tenseness of her muscles as she strained them to the limit—then suddenly she threw all her superhuman power into a vast effort. The rock shifted, trembled, then with a final jerk rolled on one side.

"How the devil did you do that?" Herc demanded, helping Hygiea out of the hole. "Surely I'm as strong as you are?"

"Probably stronger—but the art of leverage is also one of balance. Given a lever long enough one could shift a whole planet— But we've important things to discuss," the Amazon broke off. "You are wondering how I arrived so opportunely? It's simple enough. I just thought that since I was tracking down exponents of zombeism, they, though criminals, might possibly have the missing ingredient for synthesis which I cannot find. So I decided to follow you. Next thing I saw here was your ship on the plateau at the top of the cliff and you being attacked by Mercutians— Just what happened to Waltham?"

"So they took our ship up to the plateau!" Herc exclaimed. "Well, thank heaven it wasn't lost anyway— Oh, Waltham!" He glanced at his sister grimly. "I guess he turned out to be a no account criminal."

"Meaning what?"

Herc explained in detail. At the end of it the Amazon was looking both grim and thoughtful.

"So he was the criminal scientist in question? Just as well I followed you. But, Herc, what you tell me about transfer of life sounds interesting. You say his lab is still intact?"

"All complete with apparatus—"

"That's the best news I've had since I started my synthetic experiments. It means that I have only to duplicate—or better still, transfer—the apparatus to my own laboratory and study it out. Don't you see what your adventure has brought to light?" she exclaimed. "If life current can be transferred to corpses to make them live it can also be transferred to synthetic beings to make *them* live, too."

"Uh-huh," Herc acknowledged, rather doubtfully.

"What?" the Amazon asked. "I shall use you for the synthetic males, and you Hygiea for the females. What's wrong with that?"

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"Two things," Herc said worriedly. "On the one hand, how do you think our strength will stand up to it? Bringing eight of those zombies into life nearly finished me."

"Eight on the run, yes. But to bring one to life would hardly affect you at all, would it?"

"No, but I'd always be about that much short."

"Only for about twelve hours," the Amazon smiled. "Life energy and bodily strength is simply replaced by food and vitamin tablets. A man who gives a pint of blood for transfusion does not permanently remain that much short, does he?"

HERC looked surprised. "Good Lord, I never thought of it that way. By that reckoning, Hygiea and I could go on supplying life current for the synthetic creatures as fast as you made them."

"Exactly. And for that reason alone your Mercutian exploit has proved eminently successful. That empire of synthetic, perfect beings to rule the universe can become a fact. . . ."

"There's another drawback," Herc said. "These synthetic men will be chained to my will, just as the women will be to Hygiea's."

"Could you wish for anything better?" the Amazon smiled. "Legions for both of you—infallible men and women ruled by your will as you spread the scientific dynasty to the far corners of space. That is real triumph. . . . Now come! I want to see this laboratory which Waltham so unwittingly built for us."

FROM THE PLASTICS FRONT

THE latest developments in the field of plastics are always news! The Plastics Department of E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company has announced new uses for the well-known plastic interlayer of automobile safety glass. Most sensational are their claims for this plastic material as a substitute for rubber.

Hospital sheeting, raincoats, bags for transporting drinking water to soldiers, life rafts and belts, food bags, surgical plaster, and water-proof and oil-resistant suits for sailors can be made from a fabric coated with "Butacite" polyvinyl acetal resin, instead of rubber.

This new plastic coating is lighter than rubber, but it equals or surpasses it in wear resistance. Although it has been developed as a substitute in time of stress, "Butacite" has led chemists to predict that it will replace rubber as a coating material for fabrics even when rubber is again plentiful. Such is its superiority in several special uses.

Formula variations of this plastic discovery are also active in the rubber-replacing quality. Rubber in extruded tubing, in clamps to prevent vibration of fuel lines on airplanes, and in a number of military applications will no longer be a necessary component. In the shoe and paper industries, too, rubber latex is being replaced as an adhesive.

This versatile plastic is also claimed as a "life-saver" in many other civil and military fields. It provides a shatterproof material for windows in factories and barracks, a sound dampening material in pick-up microphones, and an effective adhesive for plywood. The number of uses to which "Butacite" and its chemical brothers can be put has, in fact, already exhausted the amount of material at hand in the laboratories which have so quickly explored its potentialities. But "Butacite" can be made in tremendous quantities when needed urgently. Many of these industries which can use it to good advantage, anyhow, produce civilian goods—which can wait.

The original use for "Butacite" is still being applied, too. It is still used in making safety glass for some transparent sections of airplanes, and for windows of trucks, tanks, and other military equipment.

Another point to be chalked up for this remarkable material is its adaptability to standard production processes. Fabric can be coated with plastic with the same machinery used when coating with rubber, thus eliminating the great expenses of providing new equipment and new technicians.

As final testimony to the effectiveness of "Butacite," it has been established under experimental conditions that, in the sealing and waterproofing of the seams of a raincoat, one and three-quarters pounds of rubber are replaced by a much smaller amount of plastic material *in each raincoat!*

In nine hectic months, these tremendous steps in plastic research have been taken, enough normally, to satisfy the requirements of a ten-year project!

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The CURSE of MANY HANDS

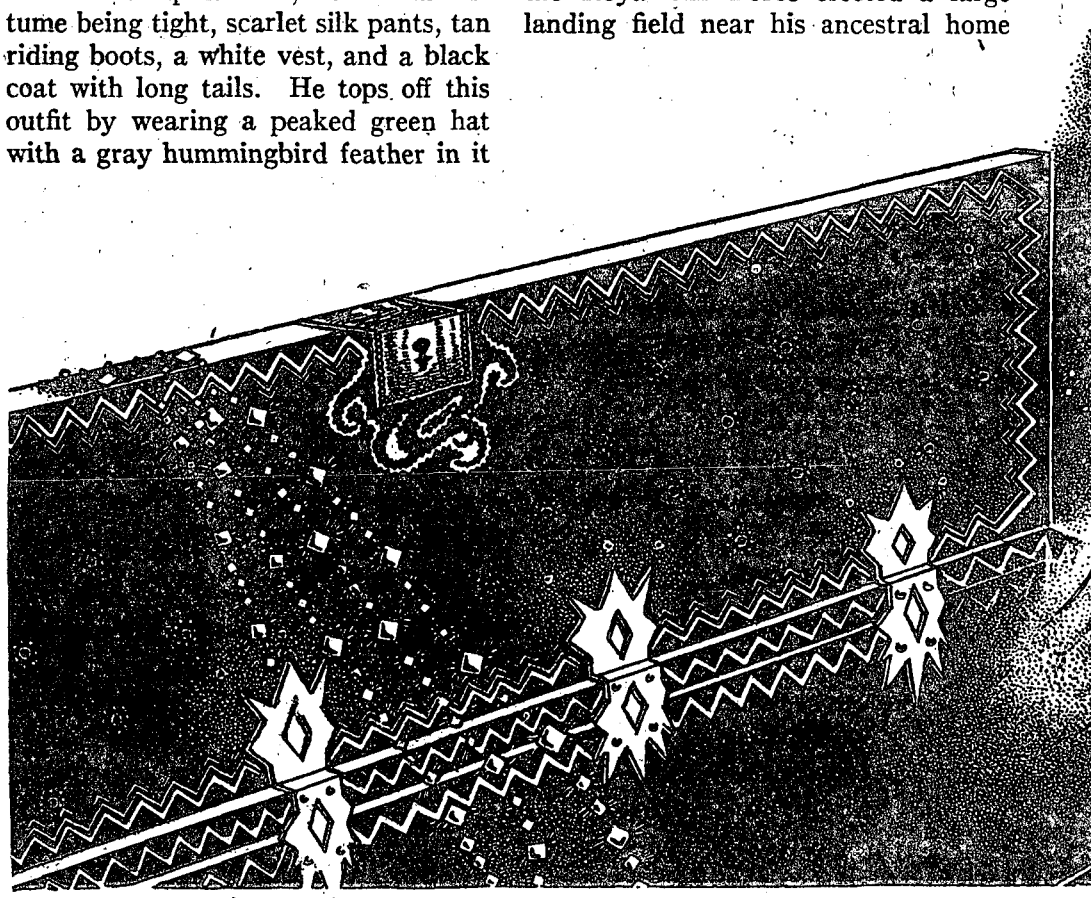
By E. K. JARVIS

SOMEBODY fell heavily against my door.

"Get up and see who it is, you big ox," Ed said.

I was sitting in my room talking to Ed when this happened. Ed is a Gremlin. He looks a lot like Dopey out of Snow White, except that he is not as big as Dopey, being only about a foot tall. What he lacks in size, he more than makes up in color, his normal costume being tight, scarlet silk pants, tan riding boots, a white vest, and a black coat with long tails. He tops off this outfit by wearing a peaked green hat with a gray hummingbird feather in it and the whole costume makes him look like something out of Robin Hood. As a matter of fact, Ed claims he was once a member of Robin Hood's band, when he was younger, but I have always doubted this part of his story.

I discovered Ed in Maine. He belonged in Scotland and he was one of the Little People but how he got to this country is a story in itself. It seems the Royal Air Force erected a large landing field near his ancestral home



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She screamed wildly and shrank away from the chest

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in the highlands. The noise of the planes taking off and landing annoyed the Little People and they began to take their revenge by hitching rides on the bombers and annoying the pilots. Many an RAF flyer, finding his motor suddenly conking, has sworn that a Gremlin was holding his thumb over the carburetor jet. After the plane has dropped a few thousand feet and the pilot has accumulated a few thousand gray hairs, the Gremlin takes his thumb off the jet, the motor picks up, and the Gremlin sits back and laughs and laughs at the fright he has given the pilot. This is the Gremlin idea of fun.

Ed had boarded a plane with just this idea in mind. He thought the plane was heading for Germany on a bombing mission and he would have some fun with the pilot.

He made a mistake. The plane wasn't going to Germany. It was a ferry ship bringing pilots back to the United States. By the time Ed discovered where the ship was going, the transport was halfway across the Atlantic and all he could do was hold on and take a ride for himself. He almost turned into an icicle before the plane reached its base in Newfoundland, and when it landed, he promptly headed south, looking for a warmer climate. I found him in the Maine fishing country, wet, cold, and darned near starved to death, a combination of circumstances which forced him to reveal himself to a human. Ordinarily, Ed tells me, the Little People will not let humans see them because men have mistreated them in the past. When I discovered him, Ed was willing enough to let me see him. He was too hungry to do anything else. After I recovered from the shock of realizing I was talking to a little man about a foot tall, I asked him what he wanted.

"Something to eat," he growled. "And be quick about it!"

For a little man, he was certainly pugnacious. When I gave him some sandwiches from my knapsack, he regarded me with more favor and when I produced a small bottle of Scotch whiskey—a handy thing to have on a fishing trip—he grabbed it with cries of joy. Not for nothing had he come from Scotland!

THAT was the beginning of my association with Ed the Gremlin. Because of the Scotch, he promptly adopted me. I brought him back to town and shared my room in the Elite Theatrical Hotel with him. He slept in the dresser drawer.

At first I tried to exhibit him to my friends, but he would have none of it. He had adopted me but he didn't trust anybody else. If anybody entered my room, Ed promptly vanished. Literally, he vanished. He was never quite able or willing to explain how he worked his vanishing act, but he could either make himself invisible or he could move so quickly that the eye could not follow him. It was this amazing ability to vanish at will that had enabled the Little People to exist in a world dominated by humans, this and their shyness. Ed was so shy he wouldn't even let Sue see him.

"That fifinella is not going to get her hooks in me," he growled, shaking his head savagely. "If you're big enough sucker to fall for a pair of blue eyes and a baby face, I can't do anything to prevent it—"

"Sue is a swell girl!" I hotly answered. "I like her. And no darned elf is going to knock her around me!"

"Don't you call me an elf!" Ed snapped back. "I'm a Gremlin, and proud of it. And girl babies ought to be drowned as soon as they are born!"

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It was at this point that somebody fell heavily against my door.

"Get up and see who it is, you big ox!" Ed said. "If it's one of your usual drunken friends, I'm ready to lam."

I opened the door. Mary Hargraves sagged into the room. If I hadn't caught her, she would have fallen flat on her face.

Mary and Sue shared a room down the hall, and I often suspected, when no new shows were opening and jobs were scarce, they often shared their last can of baked beans. Mary was a swell kid and I liked her. She had a heart as big as a whale.

She was wearing a thin little house dress. Her face was blue. She was tearing at her throat with both hands.

"Jimmie—" she choked. "Jimmie—" This was as far as she could get.

I saw what was wrong with her then. There was a length of chain, or beads strung on a linked chain, around her throat. It was cutting into the flesh, choking her. She was trying to tear it away. She had broken her finger nails and scratched her throat until it was bleeding, trying to break that cursed chain.

I snatched at it. I couldn't get a grip on it. My fingers wouldn't slip under it. Mary choked horribly and slid to the floor.

My first mad thought was that she was dead. Then I realized she wasn't dead yet but that she would be dead unless I did something quickly. The chain was choking her. It had to be removed. I dropped on my knees and dug finger nails under those cursed gem-encrusted lengths.

I got my fingers under it and pulled. The darned thing didn't give. I yanked again. This time something slipped. The end of the chain came free. The end had not been tied; it had been tucked under the encircling links. I yanked it loose from Mary's neck. The momentum as it came free caused it to spin around my wrist.

I DIDN'T have time to think about that then. I was busy with Mary. When the chain came loose from her neck, her breast heaved and air flooded back into her lungs. I grabbed a bottle of Ed's favorite drink from the closet—Ed, the little rascal, having vanished—and dribbled the hot liquid between her lips. She choked but managed to swallow a little of the whiskey. I picked her up and carried her to the sofa. She began to show signs of reviving.

I was going nuts wondering what had happened to her. It was about one o'clock in the morning and she should have been asleep but I knew that she and Sue often sat up until the early hours of the morning. What had happened to her? Had somebody slipped a chain around her neck and tried to choke her to death? The thought sent a cold chill into my mind. That would have been murder. It was impossible. No one would try to kill Mary. She hadn't an enemy in the world.

With a gulping sob, she regained consciousness. There was terror in her eyes as she looked at me. I gave her a stiff drink and let her rest a minute.

"What happened, Mary? How did you get that chain around your neck? What kind of an accident did you run into, anyhow?"

I thought it was an accident. I couldn't conceive of it being anything else.

Her words froze me.

"It wasn't—it wasn't an accident, Jimmie," she whispered.

"No?" I gasped. "Then what was it? Do you mean to tell me somebody tried to kill you?"

She nodded. "Yes. No, that isn't

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what I mean either. It was an accident, but it wasn't. I mean—"

"Just exactly what do you mean? One second you say it wasn't an accident. With the next breath you say somebody tried to kill you. What are you talking about, girl?"

She was on the verge of hysteria. I could see her pull herself together.

"I mean it was an accident that I was almost killed. He wasn't after me. He didn't want me—"

"*He?* Who the devil are you talking about?"

"Mordu," she whispered.

"Mordu!" I exploded. I knew the man. He called himself Mordu the Hindu Mystic and he occasionally got billing in some small vaudeville house. I had seen him several times in tea shops, gazing in his crystal ball or giving tea readings for credulous women customers. He was down in my books as a strictly no-good fake. A tall, brown-skinned bearded Hindu, he lived down the hall.

"Mordu tried to kill you! I'll tear that fake to pieces and feed him to the dogs. What did he do—slip up behind you and jerk a string of beads around your neck."

"He isn't a fake," Mary protested weakly. "He wasn't even in the room when it happened."

There was a quaver in her voice and in her eyes was—terror. The sight sent an uneasy feeling through me. "What are you talking about—he wasn't even in the room when it happened?"

She tried to speak and the words would not come. She tried again, her throat muscles working.

"Magic," she choked out a single word.

"Magic?" Was Mary out of her head? Had she taken leave of her senses? Was she trying to tell me that Mordu had tried to kill her by magical means? It was impossible.

"Nuts!" I exploded. "If that faker knows anything about real magic, I'll kiss an elephant—"

THAT was as far as I got. I was talking out of turn again. The look in Mary's eyes told me I was talking out of turn. But something told me far more emphatically than the look in her eyes. There was a sudden, sharp pain in my right arm. I looked down.

The gem-encrusted chain that I had torn from around Mary's throat had wrapped itself around my arm. It was so tight it was cutting off all circulation. And it was growing tighter. I saw it stretch and jerk itself. The pressure on my wrist increased. I stared at it in horror, too dazed to try to do anything.

I remembered that it had spun around my wrist when I had torn it from Mary's throat. At the time I had had the impression that this had been an accident.

It hadn't been an accident. The cursed thing had deliberately wrapped itself around my wrist. As though it were alive, or as though it was being pulled by invisible hands, it was tightening around my arm and getting tighter every second!

RIGHT then and there my mind started skipping across country like a kangaoo in a hell of a hurry to get somewhere. My mind didn't know where it wanted to go and consequently it seemed to be trying to go in every direction at once. Most of all, it kept yelling that my eyes were liars, that they didn't see any length of chain wrapping itself around my wrist, and that the fierce pains shooting up my arm were hallucinations. "You're all liars, the whole bunch of you!" my mind was yelling.

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I was too paralyzed to move.

Mary came up off the couch like she was shot out of a gun. She grabbed the chain. I felt her broken finger nails dig into my flesh. She jerked the end of the chain loose. Where she got strength I will never know, but she tore that chain off my wrist. Writhing like a snake, it tried to wrap itself around her arm. She flung it down. It hit on the floor and lay there, writhing. She jumped on it. Her heels beat a sharp tattoo as she crunched the thing beneath her feet. With a sharp metallic tinkle, it stopped writhing. Broken in pieces, it lay quietly on the floor. Mary kicked it to one side. It lay where it fell.

She looked at me. Her face was as white as milk. "Are you all right, Jimmie?" she whispered.

I nodded. "Mary—" I whispered. "That thing—it wrapped itself around my arm. You don't mean that it wrapped itself around your neck, that Mordu. . . ."

"That's exactly what I mean," she answered. "Mordu called it the 'curse of many hands'.* He threatened her her with it when she wouldn't marry him—"

"Marry him?" I gasped. "Has that dog been trying to get Sue to marry him?"

"Yes," she answered. "For weeks now he has been pestering her to marry him. Of course, she wouldn't do it. Finally he threatened her. He said he would put the 'curse of many hands' on her if she didn't do what he wanted her to do. She laughed in his face. This evening when we got back from the show there was a black chest in our room. We opened it. Horrible, almost invisible hands holding lengths of chain leaped out of it. They grabbed Sue. That was why I came after you, for help—"

My mind was still reeling. I could not visualize Mordu the Hindu Mystic having the infernal guts to propose marriage to Sue Martin. Nor could I visualize him as knowing enough real magic to threaten her with something as incredible as the "curse of many hands" if she refused him. It seemed I was wrong on both counts. He had proposed to her. And after what had happened to Mary and after I had seen that length of chain wrap itself around my arm, it was no longer possible to doubt that he could back up his threats.

At this point I realized what Mary was saying. Those same cursed chains had attacked Sue.

Mary had come to me for help.

I waited just long to jerk a gun out of the drawer of my desk. The gun had been given to me by a friend in the police department, who had taken it from a criminal. He had thought it would make a nice souvenir.

Gun in hand, I kicked the door open and raced down the hall to Sue's room.

CHAPTER II.

Mordu's Story

THE room was empty. Sue wasn't there. She was gone. Something

* *The Curse of Many Hands*:—According to the legend, this horrible weapon consisted of short lengths of gem-encrusted chains, the ends of which were pulled by invisible hands. The weapon was used in several ways. The chains could be thrown at an enemy. Striking him, they would circle his throat and the invisible hands would pull them tight, throttling the victim. They could also be set as booby-traps in doorways or other places where an enemy could be expected to pass, the chains dropping on him. Other methods included sealing them in a box and sending the box to the victim. Thinking he is receiving a present, the victim will open the box and fall prey to the chains. The chains could also be used to control a victim by forcing him to obey the magician's orders under threat of throttling if he disobeyed.—Ed.

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else was there. A chest. It was sitting on a chair, top thrown back. The chest of Vishnu! Mary had said that hands holding lengths of chain had leaped from the chest. I did not in the least doubt that she knew what she was talking about. The chest was not important. What had happened to Sue?

It took ten seconds to look in the closet and under the bed. If she had been strangled, she might have fallen to the floor and rolled under the bed in her efforts to free herself. She wasn't there. The bathroom was empty. Neatly washed stockings and other feminine dainties were hanging over the radiator, drying.

"Sue! Where are you? Sue!"

There was no answer.

Mordu's room was down the hall. I didn't bother to knock on the door. I kicked it open. The window shade was carefully drawn, the place was heavy with incense. I snapped on the light.

If Mordu the Hindu Mystic had been there I think I would have shot him. He wasn't there.

I had halfway expected to find Sue in his room. I didn't find her.

By this time Mary had recovered enough of her strength to walk. She came down the hall.

"You stay here," I told her. "I'm going down to the desk and see if Sue has gone out."

There was an elevator but I didn't have time to wait for it. I used the stairs.

The desk clerk was almost asleep. His eyes popped open when he saw me.

"M-M-Mr. Stewart!" he gulped. "W-w-what's wrong?"

He wasn't looking at me. He was staring at the gun in my hand. I had forgotten I had it. Probably the desk clerk thought it was a hold-up, for he started to raise his hands. Either that or one of the Elite Hotel's guests had finally run amok, which would have been little more than was expected of a playwright. I shoved the gun in my pocket.

"Has Sue Martin gone out recently?"

"W-what?"

The clerk wasn't very quick on the mental uptake. He needed time to think over a question before he could answer it.

"Have you seen Sue Martin within the past few minutes?"

"Y—you mean Miss Martin?"

THERE wasn't anything you could do to hurry the operation of his mind. You just had to wait until it worked of its own accord. After growling along in low gear for a while, he suddenly went into high.

"Yes!" he said. "M-Miss Martin went out a few minutes ago."

"Was anyone with her?"

"N-no. I remember it now. She walked kind of funny, like she was being pulled along and was trying to hold back. I thought she might have been sick, or something. I spoke to her but she didn't answer me. She didn't even seem to hear me." His voice took on an injured tone as if his vanity had been hurt because she hadn't noticed him.

Sue had gone out alone! She had walked as though she was trying to hold back but was being pulled along against her will! I didn't dare let myself think what this might mean.

"Did you notice which way she turned when she left the hotel?"

"Right," the clerk said promptly. "She turned to the right. I watched her. Is anything wrong with her, Mr. Stewart? Is she sick or something?"

The clerk's questions faltered into silence as I went out the door. Sue

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had turned to the right. Where had she gone? She hadn't had time to go far. My heart jumped up into my throat as I looked down the street.

"Sue!" I yelled.

She was less than two blocks away. The sidewalks were deserted. Sue was standing under a street light. She didn't seem to hear me.

I started running toward her. She didn't move. She didn't look in my direction. Like a girl waiting to be picked up, she stood under the light and stared into the street.

She was alive! There was cause for thanksgiving in that fact. When I went to her room, I had been afraid I would find her dead, a victim of another of those cursed chains that had almost killed Mary. Apparently she wasn't even harmed. I could not guess why she had left the hotel, but Mordu's plan, whatever it had been, was doomed to failure. Once Sue was safe, I would look up that mystic and see how many of his teeth I could knock down his darned throat. This town would be short one Hindu faker.

I was still a block away from her when she was picked up. It happened so quickly I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. A black Ford came past me. It was so ordinary looking that I didn't pay any attention to it until, tires squealing, it pulled into the curb under the light where Sue was standing. There were two persons in it, the driver and a man in the back seat. The door opened.

Like an automaton, she stepped into the car. The door slammed shut behind her. The motor roared.

The car raced away. Like a phantom of the night, it turned a corner, slid out of sight before I even had a chance to get the license number. Not that the license number would have done me any good if I had gotten it. No crook would use a set of license plates that could be traced to him.

Sue was gone. Gone! She had been kidnaped right from under my nose. I didn't even have a chance to grab a taxi and follow the fleeing car. Mordu, damn him, had won. I did not in the least doubt that Mordu was in the car that had picked her up. Where had he taken her? How would I ever find her now?

The odds were I wouldn't find her. If she was found, I would have to do it and do it alone, unless Mary could help. We couldn't go to the police. The cops would not listen to what they could regard as a cock and bull story and if they did listen, it would be only long enough to toss us into the batty house. The curse of many hands! I had a picture of myself trying to tell that one to a thick-necked, bull-headed police sergeant. If the police checked the story, the night clerk would tell them that Sue had left the building of her own accord, and so far as I could testify, she had gotten into the car of her own will. Under such circumstances, there was nothing the police could or would do.

The only thing I could see to do was to go back to the hotel and search Mordu's room. He might have left some clue that would reveal where he had taken Sue.

I WENT back to the hotel. And got the shock of my life.

Mordu was just emerging from the manager's office. There was a slightly hang-dog air about him but otherwise he looked just as suave as ever.

The gun could not have come out of my pocket any faster if it had been greased.

"Get those hands up!"

Mordu looked at me in shocked sur-

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prise. He made no effort to raise his hands. "What's come over you, Stewart?" he demanded. "Have you taken leave of the little intelligence you possess?" He spoke excellent English except when he adopted a fake Hindu accent to impress a customer who wanted a reading of the tea leaves or a report on what the crystal ball was showing.

I didn't waste any time beating around the bush. "What have you done with Sue?"

His surprise deepened. "My dear sir, what are you talking about?"

"You know damned well what I'm talking about. What have you done to Sue? Where have you taken her?"

"Sue?" Apparent perplexity knotted his brows. "Are you by any chance referring to Miss Martin?"

"I'm not referring to anybody else! Where have you taken her?"

Mordu shrugged. His manner indicated he thought he was dealing with a madman. He seemed to decide to humor me. "The answer is I have not done anything with her. Nor have I, I regret to say, taken her anywhere."

The dog was lying and I knew it. True, his presence here proved he had not been in the car that had picked up Sue but he could have had a couple of confederates attend to that end of the deal for him. And if I knew him, he would have somebody else doing the dirty work, especially if there was danger attached.

"I'm giving you just ten seconds to talk—" I stopped. The manager had appeared in the door of his office. He stared in angry astonishment at me.

"What is the meaning of this, Stewart?" he demanded. "Put down that gun before I have you arrested. Don't you realize you can be put in jail for threatening another person with a deadly weapon? Put that gun down."

The manager was one tough hombre. He had to be tough. Otherwise the class of clients who patronized his hotel would steal him blind.

"This man kidnaped Sue Martin," I explained.

"Indeed? And when did this happen?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

The manager looked me over carefully. "I am afraid the only charitable view we can take of this is that you are drunk. I grant you that if I were nominating likely kidnapers, Mordu would come high on my list. But in this case, it happens to be impossible. Mordu has been in conference with me—"

"Has been in conference with you?"

"For the last hour!" the manager continued. "Ever since I detected him trying to sneak out of the building and decided it was about time to interview him again in the matter of his delinquent account. He has spent the past hour promising me that he will pay his bill immediately. No, Stewart, I am afraid Mordu has not kidnaped our Miss Martin. Now put that gun down and go upstairs and go to bed. If I have any more trouble with you, I shall certainly call the police."

THE manager was honest. There was no doubting that. He might be a tough hombre but he was a square shooter. If he said Mordu was in his office explaining why he hadn't paid his bill, you can bet the Hindu had been there, and probably sweating gallons of blood. If the manager said for me to put the gun away or he would call the police, he meant *that* too.

I put the gun in my pocket. There was nothing else I could do. I couldn't afford to tell my story to the police, not unless I wanted to find myself on the inside of a nut-house looking out.

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Mordu grinned like a wolf that has just caught a fat lamb.

"Really, Stewart," he said, "you should be more careful about what you drink. I am willing to overlook your actions this time, but if you let anything like this happen again—"

"You go to hell!" I said.

The dog was laughing at me. And there wasn't anything I could do about it. He had a perfect alibi for the time when Sue Martin was kidnaped.

It was so perfect that even I was inclined to believe it!

After all, why should he kidnap Sue? What was he going to gain by risking his neck? I could easily understand why he would want to marry her, but when she refused him, why should he kidnap her? Did he hope to force her into marriage? The idea was ridiculous.

But there was nothing ridiculous about the length of chain that had almost killed Mary, that had wrapped itself around my arm, drawing itself tighter as if it was being pulled by invisible hands.

Was Mordu responsible for that cursed length of gem-encrusted chain?

Mary had said he was, but Mary might have been mistaken. There was no tie-up between Mordu and Sue except the fact that he had proposed marriage to her.

I turned and went upstairs. Mordu and the manager watched me go.

Mary was waiting for me in my room.

"Did you find Sue?" were her first words.

I told her what had happened. "Mary, are you sure you knew what you were saying when you accused Mordu of being responsible for the attack on you and for kidnaping Sue?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"But why on earth would he attempt such a thing?" I demanded. "What's his motive? What will he gain?"

"This," she said. She handed me a folded newspaper clipping.

I took one look at it. My heart almost jumped out of my mouth.

The clipping was several months old. There was a large photograph and under it a legend and a short column of text.

HEIRESS STILL MISSING

Natalie Johnson, daughter of the late Stanley Johnson, multimillionaire steel magnate, is still missing from the palatial Long Island home which she walked out of almost a year ago, vowing never to return. Executors of her father's estate have offered a reward of $50,000 for information as to her whereabouts, but in spite of the size of the reward, no information has been forthcoming. Her signature is needed to complete legal requirements on important documents connected with her inheritance, which is estimated to amount to several million dollars.

The account was brief. It was apparently the follow-up of an earlier and much more important story.

I LOOKED at Mary. "Where did you get this clipping?"

"Out of Mordu's room," she answered. "I searched his room while you were away. The clipping was hidden in a drawer of his desk." She was breathless. "I—I didn't even guess it."

With a click, everything slid perfectly into place. Now Mordu had a motive for wanting to marry Sue, also a motive for kidnapping her, a perfect motive.

The girl we had known as Sue Martin, the girl who had lived in this third-rate hotel, earning a meager living in the chorus, our little Sue Martin—was Natalie Johnson, heiress to millions of dollars, heiress to a place in the social world, heiress to an estate on Long Island, heiress to everything that money could buy.

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The photograph proved it. The same slightly upturned nose, the same laughing eyes, the same round chubby face. There was no chance of making a mistake. I would know that face among millions. It was Sue Martin. It was Natalie Johnson.

Since this clipping had come from his room, Mordu obviously knew who she was.

No wonder he had tried to marry her. He would be marrying millions. To him, there would be nothing more desirable than that. No wonder he had kidnaped her. The executors of her estate would pay him a fortune for her safe return. Mordu the Hindu Mystic was after the one thing in the world that really interested him—a pile of dough.

He would get it, too, unless he could be stopped. And after he got it, what would happen to Sue? Would he leave her alive to testify against him? After he had collected from her estate, would he release her when her very existence would be a threat to him?

Not if I knew Mordu, he wouldn't, not in a million years! He would get the dough first, then goodbye Sue!

"We've got to find her, Jimmie," Mary whispered. "We've simply got to find her."

She was telling me! The question was how!

CHAPTER III

The Hideout

THE solution to our problem of finding Sue was simple. It involved nothing more than Mary going quietly to the lobby, keeping herself out of sight, and waiting. I went to the back door and waited. I didn't have to wait long.

Mordu came out the back door.

He walked down the alley, to the nearest cab stand, and hired a hack. I got into the next cab in line and followed him.

Mordu went directly to an old house in what had once been an exclusive residential district but which had degenerated into a rooming-house section. The building was a two-story brick structure with a brown-stone front. The blinds were tightly drawn but there was a light showing through the transom above the front door. Mordu must have been expected for the door was opened promptly when he knocked. He disappeared inside.

I paid off my cab driver and went around to the back. I did not in the least doubt that Sue was being held prisoner in this dump. My problem was to get her out. How to do it? Well, I had a gun, and there were probably not more than three men inside—Mordu and the two men who had picked up Sue outside the hotel. Surprise would be on my side. On Mordu's side there would be— I gritted my teeth. I had not forgotten the cursed length of chain that had tightened itself around my wrist, writhing as though it possessed life of its own, tugging as though invisible hands were pulling on it.

Mordu knew something of magic, devilish magic, horrible magic. Squatting in the darkness behind that house, I thought of those cursed chains. Cold chills shot up my back. My throat contracted as though I could already feel a chain tightening around my neck. The curse of Vishnu, the horrible curse of many hands—Mordu knew how to control it.

I could feel sweat gathering on the palms of my hands. I thought of how nice it would be to be back at the Elite Hotel and in bed and how pleasant it would be to argue with the manager

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about my bill. Bad as that manager was and tough as he could be about an unpaid bill, compared to what might be waiting inside this house, arguing with him would be heavenly.

"Why don't you go away from here, Stewart?" I said to myself. "Why don't you let well enough alone? This is a job for the cops. There is nothing in it for you, except maybe a broken neck. Get to hell away from here while you've got a chance.

"You damned fool!" I groaned to myself. "You damned fool!"

I knew I was going into that house!

ENTRY was easy. The coal chute was not locked. I went down it, climbed easily out of the almost empty coal bin. The basement was dark. There wasn't a gleam of light anywhere. I didn't have a flashlight and I didn't dare strike a match. Overhead I could hear people moving around. Probably Mordu and the two thugs who had been in the car. I began to hunt for the basement stairs. My plan was simple. Jump Mordu and his two helpers. If they tried to resist, shoot! I found the stairs and went up.

The basement stairs led directly to the front hall. Mordu, his two men, and Sue, were in what had been the drawing room when this house had been built. Standing beside the open sliding doors I looked into the drawing room.

Sue was sitting stiffly erect in a chair. Her face was white with fear, but so far as I could tell she was unharmed. She was not tied and she was not gagged. Her jaw was set at a stubborn angle.

"No," she was saying. "I will not."

Mordu was standing in front of her. "My dear Miss Johnson," he was saying, "you do not seem to realize the consequences of refusal. All I am asking is half a million. What is that to you?" He snapped his fingers. "You will have many millions left. What are a few dollars," he leaned forward, "compared to your beautiful throat?"

Whatever else he was, Mordu was no piker. He played for big money, half a million dollars. This seemed to be the sum he was demanding. It was a bigger ransom than any ever paid even during the days when kidnaping was a common event. Half a million bucks! How did he expect to collect it, I wondered.

"No!" Sue said.

"My dear Miss Johnson, it is a small sum I am asking."

"If I pay you once, you will be back for more. No. I won't pay off. Besides, I have renounced all claim to my estate. I don't want that money. I want to earn my own way, fight my own battles. I couldn't pay you off if I wanted to."

Mordu was patient, so patient that I knew he had an ace in the hole. "You do not seem to understand, Miss Johnson—"

"Nor do you!" I said stepping into the room.

Mordu looked into the muzzle of my gun. The suave, confident smile froze on his face. His two helpers were sitting on the couch. They leaped to their feet. When the gun muzzle swung toward them, they froze too.

I had them! I had Mordu, and if that suave son of India made a move I didn't like, I fully intended to put a bullet in him. Mordu seemed to realize my intentions. He didn't move. The only sign from him was a baleful glitter in his eyes.

"Hands up!"

Under the pressure of that gun muzzle, they got their hands up. They

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didn't act as if they liked the idea, but they obeyed.

"Come on, Sue," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"Jimmie!" she whispered. "Jimmie—"

The look in her eyes when she saw me was enough reward for risking my neck in coming here. I had never made love to her. On my income, you don't make love to anybody. I had just been a pal, and so far as I knew, that was what she thought I was—a pal. The glow in her eyes showed that all along I had been something more than a pal, and hadn't known it.

This wasn't the time for sweet nothings. This was the time to move and move fast, to get to hell out of here, and not to waste any time doing it. I could not hold three desperate men at the point of a gun forever. And Mordu and his helpers would quickly become desperate. There was no doubt about that.

"Come on, Sue. Get a wiggle on. We've got places to go." I gestured with the gun toward the door.

She didn't move.

My first impression was that she was tied to the chair. I knew this wasn't right. Her arms and her feet were both free.

"Come on, Sue!" I snapped.

When she didn't move this time I knew that something was wrong. Her lips were working as though she were trying to speak but she wasn't saying anything. At the same time I caught a glimpse, just a glimpse of something around her throat, and my heart went sick. One of those beaded chains!

I SHOULD have shot Mordu then. I should have pulled the trigger the instant that triumphant grin flashed across his face. I didn't do it because I had not clearly grasped what was happening. By the time I did grasp what was happening, it was too late.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw something flicker in the air near me. I looked like—it looked like a thin, wan hand. It was almost invisible. There was no body attached to it, or if there was, I could not see it. The cursed thing fluttered in the air.

Simultaneously, something wrapped itself around my throat, jerked itself, or was jerked, tight. Then I knew what it was. One of those chains pulled my hands. I knew also why Sue could not move. One of those chains was wrapped around her throat. If she had moved, if she in any way disobeyed Mordu, the chain was pulled tight.

Stars exploded before my eyes as the chain tightened. I was jerked backward, thrown off balance. Aiming at Mordu, I tried to pull the trigger of the gun. The Hindu was leaping at me. He had been waiting for this moment, he had known this was going to happen. He knocked the gun out of my hand. At the same time, one of his helpers hit me behind the ear. I went down for the count.

I don't know how long I was unconscious. I remember fighting desperately for air, feeling a terrible constriction around my throat, hearing a thundering roar in my head. The constriction lessened a little and air trickled into my lungs. I tried to sit up. Somebody kicked me in the face.

In the far distance I could hear a girl screaming. The scream went quickly into a gurgle as something happened to her.

"Please, please—" I could hear Sue begging. "Don't kill him. I'll do anything you want, only don't kill him—"

"Ah!" That was Mordu speaking. There was satisfaction in his voice, a kind of gloating satisfaction that made

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me want to retch. "Anything?" he asked.

"Anything!" she sobbed.

"How nice!" Mordu said. There was a thoughtful note in his voice. "Odd, isn't it, that you will do for him what you would not do for yourself? I did not realize you were so concerned about Mr. Stewart's welfare. No doubt, for his sake, you will be delighted to pay the half million I mentioned."

"No!" The idea that I was worth a half million bucks to anybody was so startling I could not believe it.

"Yes," Sue said.

"Fine!" Mordu exulted. "This solves everything! Even with the chain of Vishnu around your own throat you might have been too stubborn to pay off. But with the chain around Stewart's throat, you won't be stubborn, not when you know your failure to complete your agreement will cause the chain to tighten, a little at a time, while Stewart chokes to death. This is wonderful indeed!"

He almost hissed the words. "— will cause the chain to tighten, a little at a time, while Stewart chokes to death!"

Sue was going to pay half a million bucks for my life, and pay it without a whimper.

"We will hold both of you for a while longer," Mordu said. "Naturally, we will have to release our dear Miss Johnson so she can secure the money. Naturally we will want to keep Mr. Stewart in some secure place until she does deliver the money, to make certain she does not change her mind, thus resulting in the unfortunate death of Mr. Stewart. We can't very well keep him here because Miss Johnson knows about this place and might lead the police here when we release her."

HE was planning very carefully, making certain there were no loopholes in his scheme. If Sue was going to pay off on me, he was certainly going to hold me until she had paid off. Finding a new place to hold me, would cause a little delay. Eventually Sue and I found ourselves herded into a small room.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Mordu told us. "If you feel inclined to try to escape, remember the chains of Vishnu are still on you. In order to make doubly certain that you do not escape, Jojo, here," he indicated one of his helpers, "will be on guard outside your door."

The door closed. A key clicked in the lock. Sue was in my arms. "Jimmie!" she whispered frantically. "Are you all right, Jimmie?"

"How could I be anything but all right?" I answered. "When I'm worth half a million bucks to you?"

CHAPTER IV

The Secret of the Chains

"YOU'RE worth more than that to me," Sue said. "If I had it—"

"If you had it?" I stared at her. "You're Natalie Johnson, aren't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Natalie Johnson is worth more bucks than Morgenthau can count, isn't she?"

"Y-yes. She will be, when she is twenty-one. I'm not twenty yet. Oh, Jimmie, don't you understand? I'm a poor little rich girl. Some day I will be worth millions but right now I'm not worth anything. Everything is tied up in my father's estate. One of the reasons I ran away was because I never had a dollar I could call my own. Every penny I spent had to be accounted for, every penny. If I go to

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the executors of my estate and ask for half a million dollars—"

"But they offered fifty thousand dollars for information about you!"

"They could spend fifty thousand dollars to find me, but after they had found me, they couldn't spend a dollar on me. It's not really their fault. They have to abide by the terms of my father's will. My father, if I do say it, was a hard man. He believed that women knew nothing about money and he made certain that I would never spend any of his money foolishly. The best lawyers in the country drew his will and they made it fool-proof. Jimmie, if I go to the executors of my father's estate and ask for half a million dollars, no matter how badly I need it, they will say, 'We are sorry, Miss Johnson, but really the matter is out of our hands'."

I stared in consternation at her. Somehow or other I had had the impression that an heiress was simply rolling in money but like many of my ideas, this one was subject to revision. Poor little Sue! Never even a dime that she could spend without accounting for it, never a few bucks to spend for some foolish doodad that her feminine heart craved, never any dough to spend on a silly hat to make her feel good in her heart.

"You told Mordu you would pay off!"

"I was trying to gain time," she whispered. "I thought if we could gain time, you could do something—"

The way she looked at me, I got the impression she thought that whatever needed to be done, I could do it. The look in her eyes made me feel like Superman. I could kick over houses, I could move mountains, I could fly! My chest began to swell.

Simultaneously something began to constrict around my throat. I couldn't see it but I knew what it was—the chain of Vishnu, tightening! Mordu's magic!

Damn Mordu! Damn his magic! They couldn't stop me. I had torn one of those chains from Mary's throat; she had torn one from my wrist. I could tear this one from my throat. I dug my fingers under the circling lengths, pulled with all my might.

Superman might have succeeded, but in spite of the fact that Sue made me feel like him, I wasn't Superman. I got my fingers under the chain. It began to tighten, inexorably. I pulled with all my might. The damned thing wouldn't come loose. Sue tried to help me. One of those chains was around her neck too. Her face went white, she snatched at her throat.

I REMEMBER falling heavily. Sue fell beside me. We lay on the floor struggling for breath. The chains were still tightening. The door of the room opened. Jojo looked in. He stuck his head out into the hall and yelled. Mordu put in an appearance. He took in the situation at a glance. Making passes in the air, he spoke rapidly in a strange language. Grudgingly, as though they hated to let go, the chains relaxed. Air rattled into our lungs.

"Too bad!" Mordu said, with false sympathy. "You should have known better. Vishnu's guardians will not permit you to escape unless I will it and no man may break the chain around his own neck. Did I not warn you, Stewart?" He emphasized his question by kicking me in the ribs.

The Hindu looked at me as though he hoped I would protest. I kept my mouth shut.

"I have decided on a place to hold you while Miss Johnson secures the money she promised me," he continued, looking at me. "All arrangements will be complete within an hour or so, at

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which time you may look forward to making a little trip. Until then I advise you to attempt no further nonsense."

Turning, he left the room. Jojo closed the door and locked it.

"What are we going to do, Jimmie?" Sue whispered. "If he hides you, I'll never be able to find you. Then, when I can't pay the money he demands, he —he'll—" She couldn't say it. Tears rolled down her cheeks but she couldn't say the words.

I knew what she meant. When she couldn't deliver, Mr. Stewart would depart this life with extreme suddenness. Mordu, out of his rage at being balked, would throttle me. Besides, he wouldn't want to leave any unnecessary witnesses behind him. No matter how I looked at it, my goose was cooked. If we tried to escape, the chains would choke us. If we managed to get rid of the chains—which seemed impossible —there was Jojo outside the door. And Jojo, if I haven't mentioned it, had a cauliflower ear, a flat nose, and he looked as if he would throttle his grandmother for two bucks to bet on a horse race.

"I hate to admit it, pal, but we're in the soup," I said.

She wasn't looking at me. We were both sitting on the floor. She was looking past and beyond me. There was a glassy look in her eyes and her already pale face was even paler than it had been. I knew instantly what was happening. She was looking at something behind me, something that she could see but that I couldn't see, something that was scaring her half to death. A spider with ice water on his legs went running up my back.

"What is it, Sue?" I whispered.

She swallowed. "I'm—I'm out of my head. I'm seeing—seeing things that aren't possible. There's—there's a little man standing right behind you—"

"A little man!" I jerked my head around.

ED WAS standing just inside the door. Ed, the Gremlin. Until that moment I had completely forgotten that such a person as Ed existed. It was Ed all right. The humming-bird feather in his cap looked bedraggled, there were unmistakable smudges of coal dust on his scarlet pants, and a ferocious scowl on his face, but there was no doubt but that this was Ed.

"How—how did you get here?" I stuttered.

"How do you suppose I got here?" he snarled. "I followed you, you big ox. And I would have been up here sooner if I could have got out of that damned coal bin. Of all the blithering idiots I have met, you are the worst. Why did you have to sneak in through the coal chute? I almost never got out of that coal pile. And it was all your fault, you big ox!"

Oh, he was in a fury. He had followed me down the chute and had landed in the coal bin. I was able to step out of the bin without any trouble but a wall that I could step over was a long hard jump for the Gremlin.

"I'm lucky I wasn't marooned down there the rest of my life!" he raged. "Maybe shoveled into the furnace and burned to a cinder. If I hadn't been able to pile coal high enough to get over the edge of the bin, I would have had to stay there forever. And it would have all been your fault, you big chunk of worm food."

I tried to protest that I didn't know he was following me but my protests did no good. He would have none of my apologies. Then I realized that Sue was staring at us. There was a dazed, bewildered look on her face. I remem-

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bered she had never seen Ed before.

"This is Ed," I said, introducing them. "Ed, the Gremlin."

Sue stared at me as though she thought I had gone nuts. This was probably what she did think. After all she had been through, the idea of a Gremlin living with me was a little too much for her. I had to explain where I had found Ed, how he had got to this country, and all about him. Sue swallowed once or twice, as though she found believing all this to be tough going, but eventually she began to smile. She smiled at Ed. "Why, you nice little man," she said. "I could hug you."

"Sh!" I quickly cautioned her. "Don't call Ed a little man. He doesn't like it. He doesn't like women either."

I turned quickly to Ed to stifle an outburst of profanity. "She didn't mean it," I said. "She just doesn't know about you. Ow!"

The little devil kicked me fiercely in the shin. "What do you mean, she doesn't mean it?" he demanded. "Of course she means it. She likes me. Keep your big mouth out of this."

Sweeping off his hat like a cavalier, he bowed from the hips. "At your service, Miss," he said. "And any time you want to start the hugging, it's all right with me."

ONE thing about Ed, you could never tell how he was going to react. Sue's smile had certainly worked wonders with him. I stared at him in astonishment. He caught me at it. And kicked me fiercely on the shin again. "Don't sit there with your mouth open, you big gorilla!" he snapped. "You act like I had never met a lady before."

"How did you get into this room?" I asked him.

"I came in when the gorilla outside opened the door to see what had happened to you," he answered. He glared at me. "And I must say, I find you in a pickle. It looks to me as if an ox as big as you are would know how to take care of himself. But *do* you?" he was shouting the words. "Do you know how to take care of yourself? Answer me!"

He had me. Outside the door I could hear Jojo moving around. I could hear steps sounding in the hall. Mordu was coming for me. There wasn't a damned thing I could do to help myself. The chains of Vishnu held me.

"The big shot is coming!" Ed hissed at me. "Why don't you get up and do something, big mouth?"

"I can't."

"You can't! I suppose you're anchored there on the floor." He stopped speaking and looked closely at me. A sudden, startled look appeared in his eyes. For the first time he saw the chains of Vishnu circling my neck.

"What are those things, boss?" he asked. There was fright in his voice.

I told him what they were.

For the first time since I had known him, there was sympathy in his eyes. "I see," he said. "The chains of Vishnu. Made centuries ago by the metal dwarfs — enchanted chains. Let me see now." He seemed to be thinking hard. "There is a way to work those things, if I can only think of it." His voice went into silence.

"A way to work them?" I whispered. "You mean—there is some way to overcome them?"

"Shut up and let me think!" he snapped.

Outside the door I could hear Mordu and Jojo conferring in low tones. "Everything is arranged," Mordu said. "I have decided on a place to hold Stewart while Miss Johnson secures the money." There was an exulting, gloating note in his voice when he spoke of the money he thought he was going to

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get. Money excited him. Money was the only thing he ever really wanted.

"That's fine, boss," Jojo said. "We'll really make a killing this time."

"Thumbs!" Ed said suddenly.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hook your thumbs under the chain and pull!" he spoke. "It's come to me now. The chains are enchanted. If you use only your fingers you cannot pull them loose. But the metal dwarfs never set up an enchantment without setting up a way to overcome it. You can't pull these chains free with your fingers. But if you pull with your thumbs, the chains will come loose. Hook your thumbs under that chain and pull, you big ox!" Ed was shouting at the top of his voice. His loudest tone was only a squeak of sound but even so, it must have penetrated to the other side of the door. Mordu must have heard it.

"What's that noise?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know," Jojo answered. "It came from inside the room."

"Give me the key!" Mordu said. "They're up to something in there."

The key rattled in the lock.

"Hook your thumbs under that chain and pull!" Ed shrieked. "They're coming in here. Get moving, you big tub of lard, before it's too late!"

THE idea that pulling with the thumbs would break the grip of the chain was so startling that I had not attempted to act. I acted now, though not with any real hope of success, but because Ed was so excited. Hooking my thumbs under the chain, I pulled. Almost invisible hands fluttered in the air near me, fluttered as though they were fighting to retain their grip. The chains began to tighten.

"Pull, damn you, pull!" Ed shouted. He was jumping up and down with excitement.

The key clicked in the lock.

I pulled. With scarcely no effort on my part, the chain that circled my throat came free. It writhed in my hands. I stared stupidly at it. The chain was off my throat! Ed had known what he was talking about! Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Sue pulling on the chain that threatened her, pulling and winning. Dazedly I remembered that when I had succeeded in removing the chain from Mary's neck, I had accidentally slipped my thumbs under it and hadn't known I had stumbled on the one way to break the curse of Vishnu.

The door was kicked open. Mordu stood there. He saw me sitting on the floor. He saw the chain writhing in my hand, trying to wrap itself around my wrist. A look of surprise appeared on his swarthy face. His hand leaped toward his pocket as he reached for a gun.

I flung the writhing chain right into the middle of his face. Like a snake, it wrapped itself around him. The ends twisted in the air, seeking his throat. Mordu screamed.

"Try some of your own medicine and see how you like it!" I grunted. I got to my feet.

Mordu hadn't had time to pull his gun. He was too busy fighting the chain to think about the gun. He hadn't been expecting to find his own curse trying to strangle him and he was too surprised to react promptly. All he could think about was that chain of Vishnu. Of course he knew the secret of the chain, he knew how to control it. Digging his thumbs under the cursed thing, he started to lift it free. He was so busy doing this that he forgot all about me.

I measured the distance with my eye and took one step forward. When I moved, all my body was behind my fist.

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I hit Mordu in the middle of the stomach.

"Whoosh!" the Hindu gasped. The fist had landed solidly. He doubled over. He straightened up a damned sight faster than he had bent over. My fist, landing flush on his exposed jaw, was the thing that straightened him up.

"Ugh!" he said. He staggered against the door. There was a glazed look in his eyes.

Jojo was looking in to see what the hell was going on. I saw another chain fly past me and strike the thug in the face. I knew that Ed and Sue between them had managed to pull the chain from her and give it to Jojo. It clamped around his throat. Jojo looked as if he didn't like it.

"Give 'em hell, boss!" Ed was screaming. "Tear 'em to pieces! Mow 'em down."

Mixed with his words were a lot of strange sounds that I could not understand but which I took to be Gremlin war cries or Gremlin profanity.

"Tarboosh! Sockador! Blast the hell out of him!"

MORDU, the dazed look on his face, was still standing against the door. Once, twice, three times I hit him. He fell out into the hall. I went out into the hall. Mordu was on the floor. He wasn't out. He was trying to get up.

Jojo was screaming at the top of his voice. The chain had somehow managed to wrap itself around one of his ears and it was pulling as though it was trying to yank the ear off. Jojo probably did not fully understand what had happened. All he knew was that somewhere their plans had miscarried. He could see quite clearly that Mordu was down and he could feel something trying to tear off one of his ears. Jojo started to run. He ran down the hall ninety miles an hour. Ed, screaming bloody murder at every jump, was right behind him. When he got started, Ed was a very blood-thirsty Gremlin who wanted to kick over houses and push mountains down and things. I heard glass crash as Jojo went through the front door without the formality of stopping to open it.

Mordu was on the floor. He was still moving. He was on his back and he was trying to turn over. I carefully estimated the distance and jumped into the air. When I came down I landed right in the middle of Mordu's stomach, with both feet. The Hindu gasped and quit wiggling. If he hadn't quit wiggling, I would have jumped on him again. Whatever happened to him, he deserved it. And I was willing to see that he got it. I was even anxious to see that he got it.

There was complete silence in the house. Ed had left off chasing Jojo and had turned around just in time to see me put the quietus on Mordu. His eyes popped open at the sight. He stood there in the hall looking from the Hindu to me. He swallowed once or twice as though he wanted to say something and couldn't find the courage.

"Speak up, you darned dwarf, and say whatever it is you've got on your mind."

He swallowed again. I expected him to erupt at being called a dwarf but no eruption was forthcoming.

"Bud," he said, looking at me. "I mean boss—I mean Mr. Stewart, I'd like to apologize."

"What for, you blood-thirsty Gremlin?"

Looking at the Hindu, he swallowed again. "I remember calling you some very rough names in the past, boss," he said. "Like big ox, and tub of lard, and idiot. Boss, if I had known you were as tough as you are, I would never,

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never, never have taken such liberties. After watching you work that Hindu over, boss, I want you to understand that if ever in the future I refer to you in a slighting manner, I am only fooling." He swallowed again. For the first time since I had known him, there was respect in his eyes when he looked at me.

It was a minor victory, but a very gratifying one.

Sue came out of the room. She walked unsteadily and I had to grab her to keep her from falling. I knew what she needed.

"A drink!" I said. "What you need is a drink. Poor kid, you've been through hell."

"Boss," a small voice said. "Now that you've mentioned it, I could do with one of those drinks, too. With your permission, of course."

It was Ed speaking. Ed, the Gremlin. I grinned at him. He grinned back. "I'll take Scotch," he said.

THE END

NATURE'S BOMB SHELTERS

THE use of the bomb shelter as a device for protection against one's enemies is a relatively new experience for the human race. Although we have not been forced to utilize the bomb shelter until the advent of the modern war, there are certain animals which have had to seek refuge, or even live in, bomb-proof structures since their inception on the earth. This is the result of the extreme struggle for survival which is waged among the wild animals. No where else is this more true than among the sea shore animals.

The lug worm, for instance, locks itself up in a house which penetrates over eighteen inches into the earth. To the rest of the world there is only slight evidence of its existence: a circular ring of sand at the mouth of the hole. The lug worm, while constructing his shelter, eats the sand and the inorganic matter is deposited at the entrance of the house where it provides a sort of sand bag protection.

The lime worm also believes in a house for protection, but he, in contrast to the lug worm, builds a sturdy limestone house that is cemented to a rock or stone on shore. He possesses the unique ability to remove lime from the water and then use this raw material to build a fashionable protective shelter. This dweller, however, cannot leave his home: he is, of necessity, a prisoner of his own flesh. When the worm becomes hungry he opens a door and pokes out his tentacles with which he not only obtains food but, at the same time, uses to forewarn him of any approaching danger. These tentacles are extremely sensitive to any danger; in fact, a hand passing over the house will impel the animal to withdraw his feelers.

Another odd sea creature is the sea mouse, so named because of his striking similarity to the well known land rodent, the mouse. Because he is unable to construct a house, he uses camouflage as a protective measure, having a fur coat. Although a worm with a fur coat sounds somewhat ridiculous, this is actually the case. Whenever his enemies approach, he covers his fur with mud and dirt and silently clings to a rock or some other nearby structure and then hopes that he will not be seen.

Then there is the so-called plume worm who adheres to the policy that security lies in numbers. That is, these worms build their houses close together. Like the lime worm, these worms are forced to remain within their structures throughout their lives due to the constant presence of their enemies. The encasement consists of coarse materials and is about one foot in height. Incidentally, the plume worm has the adept ability of being able to repair his house whenever it deteriorates or crumbles due to raids or severe weather conditions.

Then we have the clam worm which is the merry-maker of the bunch. He throws aside all rules of safety and lives a dangerous life. His house is hurriedly and inefficiently built, consisting of sand grains and small stones loosely glued together. Of course, this enclosure does not give him sufficient protection and consequently his life is in constant peril. In fact, every time he goes for a walk the house collapses. Although the clam worm remains home all day long, he consistently travels abroad during the night. They are exceptionally active during the full moon on summer nights. At this time thousands of them get together and mate; after the mating is concluded they sink into the ocean and die.

It is significant to note that we can derive courage and precedent from the actions of these little sea creatures who for centuries, in constant fear of their lives, have been forced to build shelters in which they recede for protection. Of course, man ought to be able to devise much more elaborate schemes of shelter.

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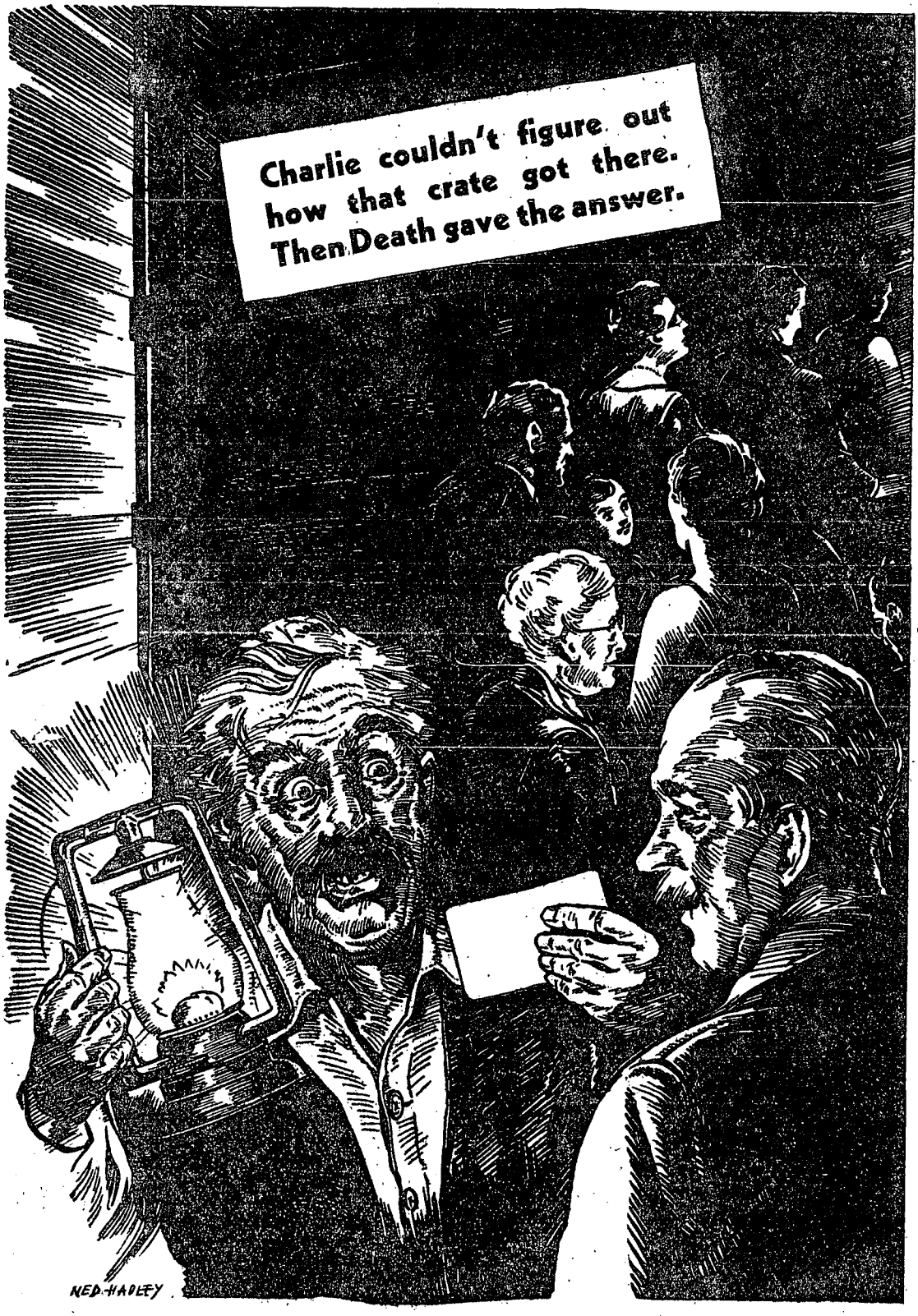

The amazed watchman examined their cards and let them pass

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WHERE IN THE WAREHOUSE?

by BRUCE DENNIS

IT WAS on a perfectly ordinary winter afternoon in early December that Lucius Fowler, owner and manager of the vast and gloomy Western Scenery Warehouse, received the dapper, middle-aged, rather handsome Mr. Santospedros in the warehouse office.

Fowler had appraised his prospective customer even before that gentleman had taken a seat before his desk.

Looks theatrical, Lucius Fowler thought to himself, *but perhaps a little too much the gentleman-type to be stage show. Maybe he's representing some touring stock opera company. Seems Italian, or Greek, from his name.*

"And what, sir," said Lucius Fowler aloud, "can I do for you?"

"I'm here," said the gentleman who'd announced himself as Mr. Santospedros, "to inquire about your warehouse."

"Certainly, sir. Certainly," Fowler beamed. "What do you wish to know

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about it? Are you inquiring about the prospects of renting stage or opera scenery? If so, we still have much on hand that has not been used by the opera and stage companies already playing here in the city. I think we could fit any requirements you'd like."

Mr. Santospedros smiled and shook his head in a gentle negative.

"No. Not precisely that, Mr. Fowler," he said. "I wish to inquire about the possibility of renting some space in your warehouse for a short time. I, ah, realize you have a tremendously large warehouse—naturally, since you store and rent stage and opera scene sets—and that at this time of year, with the stage and opera troupes in the city for long runs, you must have considerable space vacant at present."

Lucius Fowler frowned and rubbed his bald head reflectively. It was true that, with so much of his stock scenery rented out to stage and opera companies in the city at that time, he had a considerable yardage of vacant storage in his warehouse. But a request to rent such space, rather than rent stock scenic sets—which were after all the sole reason Fowler operated the warehouse—was distinctly unusual. True, the Civic Opera Company rented space between seasons to store their scenery. But the Civic Opera Company was the only organization permitted to do so, and that permission was given by Fowler merely because the Opera Company didn't rent scenery, but made its own at great expense.

So Lucius Fowler rubbed his head and frowned.

"Your request is somewhat unusual," he admitted.

Mr. Santospedros smiled his suave, handsome smile and agreed that it was probably an unusual request.

"However, Mr. Fowler," he added, "your warehouse is the only storage place with enough loft to suit my needs. There isn't another warehouse in the country, as far as I know, that would fit my specification demands. Although I am not in the theatrical business and don't want to rent scenes from you, I can pay you whatever price you set on whatever storage space you can let me have."

MR. LUCIUS FOWLER stopped rubbing his bald head and asked, with a little more interest, how much space Mr. Santospedros thought he would need.

"Every inch of loft space your warehouse can afford," Mr. Santospedros replied. "The, ah, item I intend to store is exceedingly tall. I inquired about the height of your warehouse before coming to you. It will just fit. As for width, I'd need perhaps fifty yards. The length," and Mr. Santospedros smiled, "would mean about five yards all the way along the fifty yard width of the, ah, object."

Lucius Fowler closed his eyes and tried to visualize an object of the dimensions his prospective customer had stated. It wasn't easy, and the closest Fowler could come in his visualization was something resembling an enormous and unusually thick stage backdrop. But there wasn't any stage in the world, to his knowledge, which could use a backdrop as lengthy as the distance from the floor to the ceiling in his huge warehouse. Neither was there ever a backdrop of that length and width which was five yards thick. Lucius Fowler gave it up and expressed his curiosity vocally.

"Just what is this object you intend to store, Mr. Santospedros?" Fowler asked.

Mr. Santospedros smiled charmingly, revealing his flashing teeth, and in

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his liquid smooth voice and cultured tones gave Fowler no satisfaction.

"I'm sorry," said Santospedros, "but I cannot tell you that, Mr. Fowler."

Having the balloon of his curiosity so neatly punctured made Lucius Fowler suddenly a bit indignant and more than a little snappish. He rose abruptly behind his desk.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Santospedros," he said, crisply reproachful, "but under those circumstances your request for storage space becomes extremely unreasonable. How can you expect me to accept for storage anything about which I am totally ignorant, is beyond me. After all, sir, being entrusted with the warehousing of your property it is only reasonable that, to protect myself and your goods, I should know what they are. Good day, Mr. Santospedros."

Mr. Santospedros didn't rise. He smiled, and reached into his inner overcoat pocket and pulled forth an exquisitely tooled wallet of some silken leather. He opened it, still smiling, took forth a sheaf of crisp, new, one hundred dollar notes, and tossed them carelessly on Fowler's desk.

"You will find that sheaf contains five thousand dollars, in hundred dollar bills, if I'm not mistaken," said Santospedros in his dulcet voice and charming persistence. "I, ah, feel that the extra reimbursement should compensate for what I am unfortunately unable to tell you regarding the object I wish stored. And as for your responsibility in the matter of the object's safety, I'll sign any waiver of such responsibility you might wish. All I am after, Mr. Fowler, is storage space. I shan't need it for long. Certainly not longer than a month. I will see that it is stored in your warehouse, and will provide men for its removal."

LUCIUS FOWLER, eyes bugging at the currency Santospedros had so casually flipped onto his desk, sat down as abruptly as he had risen.

"I, ah. I, that is—" began Lucius Fowler. His voice cracked, and he was unable to tear his eyes from the money.

"You accept my offer?" Santospedros asked pleasantly.

Lucius Fowler cleared his throat and managed at last to take his eyes from the five thousand dollars.

"You say you'll only need the space for a month?" he asked his would-be customer incredulously.

"At the very most," said Mr. Santospedros. "Perhaps not that long."

"But — but," Fowler stammered, "you don't mean to say you are willing to pay five thousand dollars for storage for a month or less—especially when my warehouse won't be responsible for protection of the, ah, object?"

Mr. Santospedros smiled. "That is precisely what I mean to say," he agreed. "As I said before, your warehouse is the only one suitable for my purposes. It is worth five thousand dollars to me to get that storage space for that length of time. Is it worth the same amount to you to let me have the space?"

Again Lucius Fowler looked at the money. He found a handkerchief in his hip pocket and mopped his brow.

"Yes," he said at length. "Of course it is, Mr. Santospedros. Five thousand dollars is a lot of money. A lot of money indeed."

"Indeed," Mr. Santospedros agreed, rising. He smiled amiably, charmingly.

Lucius Fowler wet his lips.

"Ah, incidentally," he said, "I wish you'd give me your word, Mr. Santospedros, that there is nothing, ah, er, dishonest in your desire for that storage space. After all," he added hur-

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riedly, placatingly, "I have to protect the integrity of my business and reputation."

Mr. Santospedros smiled more widely than before.

"I give you my solemn assurance, Mr. Fowler, and my fervent pledge of word, that there is nothing dishonest in my intent concerning the storage space or anything else. Does that satisfy you?"

Lucius Fowler picked up the five thousand dollars with hands which, blamelessly, shook with eagerness. He smiled contentedly.

"Perfectly," Fowler answered.

"Good," said Mr. Santospedros, moving toward the door. "Then there is one thing more I must arrange with you." He paused. "I shall have workmen in the warehouse from time to time, during the evening. They will bear passes which will identify them as being in my employ. I want your night watchman to be informed of this, and informed, also, that he is not to bother them, or try to watch them after they enter the warehouse."

"Workmen?" Fowler blinked in surprise.

"Yes," said Santospedros with his ready smile. "I am merely storing the, ah, object, to enable me to make certain repairs on it. That's why I rented the space. Since the entire transaction is of a necessarily secret nature, I feel that it will be better if they enter at night. That, too, is why I don't want your watchman to get too curious about the object or the men who enter on my pass."

LUCIUS FOWLER gripped the five thousand dollars in his hands tightly, uneasily. This whole thing got more and more curious. There was something about it—but he remembered the five thousand dollars in his hands. Well, it was only for a month at the most. And if anything got out of hand, he could take care of it. He gave his customer an uneasy smile.

"Very well, Mr. Santospedros. I'll inform Charlie—he's our elderly night watchman — to expect such occurrences. When do you expect to bring the, ah, object to the warehouse?"

"Tonight," said Mr. Santospedros. "My men will handle it. You merely tell your watchman to expect the object's arrival. Incidentally, what space will be available? You'd better let me know right now."

Fowler looked down at the warehouse map under the glass top of his desk. It showed clearly the vacant spaces in the storage sections. He rubbed his bald head professionally, pursing his lips in contemplation.

"There's a section open in the rear which is of perfect size for your, ah, object, Mr. Santospedros," he said. "It's section 25, you can tell your men that. Charlie will direct them to it."

"Twenty-five, eh? Good. I'll remember that," said Mr. Santospedros. "Then everything is settled. That five thousand pays me up for a month, right?"

"Absolutely," said Fowler warmly. Then he added: "Incidentally, I I meant to ask you how Charlie will be able to identify the men you send to the warehouse after the, ah, object is installed?"

Mr. Santospedros reached into his wallet pocket and pulled out a small, engraved business card. He stepped from the door to Fowler's desk and handed it to Fowler.

"Give him this card," said Santospedros, speaking of Fowler's night watchman. "He can compare it with the cards presented by the men who come there. I'll see that they each have a similar identification card."

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Lucius Fowler took the card. "Fine," he said. "An excellent idea." He dropped it into his pocket, then extended his hand to Mr. Santospedros. "Well, sir. Everything is set. The deal is closed. I hope you find everything satisfactory."

His handsome customer smiled again and took his hand. He shook it briefly, nodded, turned for the door and left the office with lithe, swift grace, the door closing soundlessly behind him.

For fully a minute Lucius Fowler stared at the door, his expression one of pleasure mingled with doubt and suspicion. Then he sighed bewilderedly and resumed his seat at his desk.

Carefully, Lucius Fowler spread the money out across his desk. Fifty one hundred dollar bills. Crisp and fresh. Just as if they'd rolled off the presses in the Mint. Fowler looked at them for a minute or more, mopping his brow with his handkerchief. Then, as if he suddenly realized the danger of his present situation, he sat bolt upright and grabbed the telephone at his elbow.

"Hello," he said a few moments later. "Is this the National Bank? Send over a messenger to the Western Scenery Warehouse. I have a rather large amount of cash I want deposited to my account. What? Oh, five thousand dollars. Yes, that's right. Will you send your messenger right over? Thank you."

MR. LUCIUS FOWLER replaced the telephone in its cradle with considerably more calm. The danger in having all that money around was now off his mind. He gathered it together and dropped it into a drawer in his desk until the messenger should arrive.

Then Fowler put his elbow on his desk and his chin in his open palm, assuming a contemplative attitude in order to meditate more seriously about the rather mysterious Mr. Santospedros and his extremely mysterious object for storage.

Fowler wondered at great length what the object could be. Then he gave up this procedure and began to wonder if it would be wise for him to be on hand that evening when the mysterious object was brought to the warehouse. No, he finally decided. He'd better not be hanging around. For all he knew, Santospedros might personally supervise the installation of the precious object of storage. And in that case, Fowler's ill-concealed curiosity wouldn't look well.

"I'll just hold my curiosity for tonight," Fowler decided aloud. "After all, if I got Santospedros sore he might demand his money back and take his mysterious whatever-it-is to some other place. I'll have plenty of time to look in on it, and unless I'm an absolute fool, I should be able to guess what it is no matter how well it might be crated or packed."

Having thus made up his mind, Lucius Fowler tried to get back to work. But it wasn't that easy. For the life of him he couldn't keep his mind from straying back to speculations concerning the mysterious storage object. It presented definitely intriguing speculations. . . .

OLD Charlie Cooper, night watchman at the Western Scenery Warehouse, uncorked his bottle of "tonic" and took a short but thoroughly satisfying swig. He smacked his lips, recorked the bottle, and returned the "tonic" to the pocket of his frayed overcoat.

It was a derned chilly night, he re-

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flected. Nuff to freeze a man into one of them icicle statues you read about.

Old Charlie reached forward and poked with a stick of wood at the coals inside the tiny stove before him. Then he put the stick aside and sat back on the wired-together chair which was his prized "at-work" possession.

Charlie took the turnip watch from his pocket and peered nearsightedly at its hands, holding it close to the glow of the stove to see it better.

Derned near ten o'clock, it was. Late. Derned late. Too derned late fer men in their right minds to be a-carting stuff to a warehouse fer to store, Charlie decided.

But ole' Fowler had told him that they wuz coming.

"Don't know when they'll arrive," Fowler had told Charlie. "Sometime tonight, though. You show them to section 25, and if there's anything to be done to help them, do it."

"Won't be coming now," Charlie figured. Too derned late fer to be a-dragging things into a warehouse. Nosir. Too derned late.

Charlie sighed. The glow of the fire was warming, or maybe it was the "tonic" taking effect. At any rate it made him drowsy. He decided that he might just as well grab off a little snooze before his next inspection trip around the outside of the vast warehouse. The old man closed his eyes.

His soft, regular snore began almost instantly. . . .

LUCIUS FOWLER hadn't had a good night's sleep at all. As a matter of fact, almost all of his slumber that night was limited to fitful catnaps between ponderings over Mr. Santospedros and his mysterious object of storage.

Consequently, it was eight o'clock, an hour ahead of his usual schedule, when Fowler arrived at the office of his warehouse the following morning. He was red-eyed and irritable from his lack of rest, but he was definitely brimming over with curiosity concerning the unknown possession of Santospedros which now undoubtedly occupied section 25 in his huge warehouse.

Molkov, the big Russian laborer who served as warehouse roustabout during the morning, and who relieved old Charlie Cooper's night watch shift at four o'clock every morning, was asleep on the office table, and obviously surprised by his employer's early and unexpected arrival.

But to Molkov's great relief, Lucius Fowler seemed not to notice that he had been sleeping on duty, and only demanded the warehouse keys in a voice ragged with impatience.

"Did the new storage consignment get properly stored last night, Molkov?" Fowler demanded, taking the keys.

Molkov, sleep still in his eyes, blinked and shook his head.

"No. It is not arriving. Cholly tell me when I am taking over his shift that the storage you expect and tell him expect do not come at all."

Fowler stopped short in amazement.

"Didn't arrive?" he demanded. "You say Charlie said it didn't arrive?"

"That," said Molkov indifferently, shrugging his massive shoulders, "is what old Cholly is telling me."

"But—but," spluttered Fowler indignantly, "the man who rented that space said specifically that the stuff, the, ah, object would arrive last night!"

Molkov picked his teeth unconcernedly with his thumbnail, shrugging again.

"Why you no look see," he suggested, "if you no believe?"

"I'll do exactly that!" snapped Lu-

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cius Fowler, turning away and striding off in a jangle of keys to the warehouse doors.

A minute later Fowler was striding quickly through the high ceiling warehouse where an incredible array of stage and operatic scenery of every description was stored.

And minutes after that he turned a corner in the block-long building and found himself in section 25, the section to which he had assigned Santospedros' storage consignment.

The section was filled with an enormous object. And the identity of the enormous object was concealed by careful crating and wrapping. But from the incredible height of the object, and the width and thickness, there was no doubt left in Fowler's mind that this was the mysterious, ah, thing, for which Santospedros had rented space.

Fowler stood there staring at it in amazement.

It reached almost completely to the top of the warehouse ceiling; in other words, almost three hundred feet high. It was easily fifty yards wide, and certainly five yards thick.

But what in the hell was it?

Fowler stopped gaping and stepped toward it. And then the voice sounded almost at his ear.

"Uh-uh, old man. Sorry. You'd better run along. This isn't here for display, you know," said the voice.

FOWLER wheeled to face the owner of the voice which had so startled him. He found himself confronting a handsome, clean-jawed, exceedingly muscular young man with blond hair that was silken and clothing that was obviously expensive.

The young man was smiling cheerfully. Smiling in a way to remind Fowler for a fleeting instant of the way Mr. Santospedros had smiled the day before.

"Who a-are you?" Fowler demanded.

The extremely muscular young giant smiled amiably, courteously, and answered in a voice that was soft, yet positive.

"It doesn't make any difference who I am," he said. "But my job is to keep people from nosing around this object here."

"But — but I'm Lucius Fowler," Fowler protested. "I own this warehouse!"

The muscular young giant smiled his handsome smile.

"I'm aware of that," he said. "I recognize you from Mr. Santospedros' description of you. He said your curiosity might possibly get the better of you."

"Why—why—" Fowler spluttered.

"Move along now, Mr. Fowler," said the young giant pleasantly, putting his massive hands gently on Fowler's shoulders. "My boss has rented this space, and for the duration of the rental it belongs to him and not to you. I have my orders, and my job is to keep people from prying around the object we have stored here."

Lucius Fowler took the subtle hint provided by those massive hands resting ever so gently on his shoulders. He moved along, and paused for a moment, out of range of the young man's hands.

"This—this is highly irregular!" he snapped indignantly.

The handsome young giant smiled.

"It most certainly is," he agreed cheerfully. "Good day!"

"Haumph!" snorted Fowler, turning and stalking off. But it was occurring to Fowler as he stomped back to the front office of the warehouse, that there was something else in the picture

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which was highly irregular.

Molkov had told him that Charlie had insisted the storage object hadn't arrived last night. If it hadn't, how was it there now? And since, obviously, it had arrived last night, in spite of what old Charlie told Molkov, it would have been impossbile for the old fool to have missed it. Utterly impossible. Why, an object of that size would probably result in waking up the neighborhood getting it into the warehouse.

Back in the office, Fowler questioned Molkov again. But the big Russian merely shrugged and repeated what old Charlie had told him. At least there was nothing to do but decide that old Charlie, for some obscure and senile reason, had been pulling the Russian's leg in lying to him about the object's not having arrived.

Through the rest of the day Fowler contented himself with this explanation. And during the day, also, Fowler tried to find the name and address of Mr. Santospedros in the telephone book. He failed in this effort, then tried a few of the swankier hotels to find out if they had a Mr. Santospedros registered with them. None of them had, a fact that increased Fowler's irritation and impatience. For he wanted to thresh certain matters out with Santospedros at the first opportunity. He wanted to demand to know what was the reason for that gentleman having employed a guard to keep him—Lucius Fowler—away from the mysterious storage consignment. It was ridiculous. It was worse than that, it was insulting.

However, having been unable to locate Mr. Santospedros through the telephone book and other similar checks, he gave up that idea and said a small prayer that the middle-aged, well-dressed, handsome customer would drop in some time that day to see that his stored object was all right.

SEVERAL times thereafter, in the forenoon and after lunch, Lucius Fowler took quiet, almost stealthy trips back through his warehouse in an effort to have another look at the huge, mysterious, crated object in section 25. But on each occasion the smiling, polite, blond giant had stepped up to him from some darkened corner to suggest courteously that Fowler get back to work and cease his efforts to pry forth the secret of the storage item.

The second time it had happened, Fowler made a quick mental resolve to return to his warehouse that night and have a look at it. And then, to Fowler's somewhat shaken astonishment, the young man apparently read his mind.

"I wouldn't advise coming back this evening, Mr. Fowler," he said amiably. "I'll be here. Or if I'm not, there'll be another guard. It's really quite pointless of you to hope for a chance to pry around this crate. Why don't you forget it?"

Fowler had gotten back to work, flushed and even more indignant than before. But he didn't forget the mysterious crate for an instant. Now it was a burning question in his mind more than ever before. A burning question which had to be cooled off by the satisfaction of knowledge before he went slightly daffy from the terrible curiosity that gripped him.

By five o'clock that afternoon, Fowler gave up the idea that Mr. Santospedros might drop in to inspect the object in section 25 by daylight.

And when Fowler closed up the office to go home, half an hour later, it was even more difficult for him to reconcile himself to the fact that

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there'd be little sense in his going back to the warehouse later in the evening in an effort to learn something about the mysterious object occupying section 25. Undoubtedly the smiling young man's warning against trying to do so had been anything but a bluff. Fowler felt glumly certain that there would probably be a guard on duty in front of that enormous whatever-it-was night and day. And, too, hadn't Mr. Santospedros mentioned that people would be coming to the warehouse to work on it?

Fowler sighed, therefore, and bitterly resigned himself to make the best of checking his curiosity until the chance presented itself for him to find out what this was all about. . . .

OLD Charlie Cooper was somewhat surprised when he arrived for the night watch. Surprised not to find a note from his employer, ole' Fowler, telling him that the shipment for section 25 would be in tonight, on account of being delayed or something last night.

But when Charlie made his first round of the evening, and peered through the window at the rear of the warehouse, the window right off section 25, he was more surprised.

For section 25 was filled with the biggest derned something or other Charlie had ever seen.

It never entered Charlie's old head that the something or other wasn't some weird piece of stage or operatic scenery. All the other stuff in the warehouse was scenery, wasn't it? Course it was. So this new stuff must be scenery, too. Although Charlie couldn't guess what kind.

"Hmm," mused old Charlie, peering in through the warehouse window, and holding his lantern high to see better, "musta been a-carted in today. Yessir. Musta been. No wonder ole' Fowler didn't leave no note. No wonder."

And then Charlie remembered that there might be people coming, then. People like ole' Fowler said. People to be admitted to the warehouse so's they could go back to section 25 and work on whatever that big object was. Ole' Fowler had said they'd only come at night. Derned funny, it was. Old Charlie had had half a mind to tell Fowler that he thought it a mite curious people should be stomping into a big ole' warehouse in the dead of winter and at night too. But he'd held his tongue, and figured his employer knew what he was about.

Then Charlie dug into his pockets until he found the card Fowler had given him.

"You aren't to let them in until they can show you a card just like this one," Fowler had told him emphatically. "Remember that, now!"

Charlie held the card—now grimy from residence in his pocket—to the light of his lantern. Slowly, he spelled out the letters of the name engraved on it.

"S-a-n-t-o-s-p-e-d-r-o-s," Charlie mumbled "Santispeederos, eh?" he muttered. "Eyetalian, I'll bet. Or Greek."

Charlie put the card back in his pocket and hurried over the rest of his first inspection. When he got back to his stove and wired-together chair, however, he was just in time for the first of the arrivals about whom he'd been told.

This arrival was a quiet young man in a big thick overcoat that had the collar pulled up around his chin. Leastways, Charlie figgered the young fella was quiet. He didn't say a word. He just handed Charlie a card, and it turned out to be just like the card Fowler had given Charlie. The one

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with the Eyetalian, or Greek, name on it.

The young man watched, hat brim pulled low over his eyes, while Charlie compared the two cards. He still didn't say a word. Satisfied that the two cards were pretty nigh identical, old Charlie opened the warehouse door and instructed the young man at great length on how to find section 25.

The young man never said a word. He just set off the way Charlie had told him to. Charlie was prompted to follow. But ole' Fowler had told him not to pry into anything the people who came at night would do. So Charlie sat down in his wired-together chair and pulled out his "tonic" bottle.

This night was going to be the long shift. The Roosian, Molkov, wouldn't arrive until nine in the morning to relieve Charlie. Then, the next week, it would be the Roosian's turn to take the long shift. Charlie sighed and uncorked the bottle, taking a long pull from it. He smacked his lips. Big help, tonic. Kept a feller warm. Specially when a feller wasn't getting any younger or spryer.

CHARLIE sat there for about fifteen minutes more, thinking how nice it'd be if he could retire some day. Funny thoughts fer a feller to be thinking at eighty or better. If a feller ain't retired by eighty there's slim chance of his ever losing his harness.

The old ticker wasn't getting any stronger, Charlie knew. Nosir. There'd been a mite of a dizzy spell just this morning and everything had gone black and whirling fer a few seconds while the ticker hurt and Charlie felt as if the wind was squeezed outta him.

Charlie's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of two more people who were evidently seeking admittance to the warehouse to work on the thing in section 25. Neither of them said a word, which was funny, since one of them was a woman.

The other one, a middle-aged man, handed his card to Charlie first. It was just like the card Charlie had. And then the card that the woman, also middle-aged, handed to him also passed the comparison inspection.

Charlie was puzzled by the pair. They seemed to be together but they didn't even speak to each other, let alone Charlie. He let them into the warehouse and gave them directions on how to find the section, and went back to his wired-chair and coal stove.

Women workers, eh? Charlie mused. Mebbe war work, eh? He'd heard tell of women workers now, since war and all. This was the first he'd seen. And it was then that Charlie realized the first three arrivals hadn't carried tools or lunch buckets or anything workers might carry.

He puzzled over this surprising detail for a while until the next arrival. This was an older man. A man about Charlie's age. But he wore the clothes of a rich man and looked like nothing more than a financial tycoon stepping out of an international economic conference.

Like the others, he didn't talk. And like the others he didn't carry any work tools or a lunch pail or anything to indicate he was going to work on anything.

Charlie took the card he presented, saw that it was okay, and admitted this richly dressed old man to the warehouse. He gave him directions like he had the others.

And then they began to come in steady succession. One after the other, occasionally in twos, very occasionally in threes, and once in fours. They came at the rate of about one ar-

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rival every five minutes, and Charlie was kept plenty busy for the ensuing hours.

By midnight he had admitted almost eighty of them. And they had been of all ages, both sexes, and all stations in life. Old Charlie found his head aching from the strain of figuring out what those people were going to work on or with when not a single one had come with tools or seemed prepared for work. None said a word.

It was the derndest thing old Charlie had ever experienced. Nosir—it was even worse—it was the gol-dernedest!

Charlie had been surprised that there had been so many so old. Some of them even older than himself. Charlie was so surprised and on edge, in fact, that he skipped his doze completely that night. He stayed wide awake straight through, even though no other arrivals presented themselves after midnight.

AND it was along about seven o'clock in the morning when Charlie began to figure they were all about due to knock off work in there and head for their homes.

But another half hour passed and none of them came out. That was when Charlie figured that maybe they didn't have watches and would be glad to have someone tell 'em what time it was getting to be.

So Charlie got out of his wired-through chair and went into the warehouse to tell them. He went all the way back to section 25 to tell them.

But they weren't there. Not one of them was there. Not one of the close to eighty who'd entered. There wasn't a soul in section 25. Nosir, nary a soul!

Charlie looked all around the warehouse and called out as loudly as his old voice could. But his only answer was a feeble echo to his feeble shout.

"Wall, I'll be derned!" Charlie exclaimed.

It occurred to him that none of them could have left without passing the same way they came in. Which would mean that, had they left, they'd have had to pass Charlie.

"But I'm derned if they did, ary one of 'em!" Charlie pondered with indignation and no little bewilderment. "An', consarn it, they jest couldn't sneak out by me!"

Muttering this way to himself, Charlie gave the towering object in section 25 a suspicious and baleful glance, then shuffled back to the front of the warehouse and his stove and wired-through chair. He'd have to report the consarn derned mystery to ole' Fowler. Yessir. Report it first thing. Good he was on late shift, otherwise he'd leave too early to catch his employer. . . .

IT WAS undoubtedly unfortunate that Lucius Fowler had spent another restless, sleepless night when old Charlie Cooper, the night watchman, buttonholed him that morning with his tale about the eighty people who went in but never came out of the warehouse. Unfortunate, that is, for poor old Charlie.

Fowler, ordinarily and kindly and decent enough man, was not at all himself that morning. His nerves, doubly overwrought by the gnawing curiosity concerning the object in section 25 of his warehouse, were trebly frayed from lack of sleep over a two-night period.

He listened to the rambling, bewildered plaint of poor old Charlie Cooper with a feverish gleam in his eye.

"So the workers went in and never came out, did they?" Fowler asked harshly, when Charlie's tale finally

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took on a little clarity to him.

"Yessir," said Charlie, "that just how it happened. They jest plumb disappeared, seems like!"

Fowler's voice grew harsher.

"Just disappeared, eh?" he snapped. "Into thin air, eh?"

"Yessir," Charlie maintained. "Inter thin air!"

The gleam in Fowler's eye flickered more angrily. He was aware, of course, that Charlie kept "tonic" with him on the job and warmed his old bones with it on cold nights. Fowler had never objected to this as long as Charlie stayed sober. He suspected that old Charlie did considerable sleeping before the stove fire, but had never objected to that particularly, so long as the old man made the regular two-hour checks.

"Did you have to help them get the stuff into section 25 the night before last?" Fowler demanded.

Old Charlie blinked dazedly.

"How's that? Don't rightly git you. They didn't bring no stuff into section 25 that night, even though you said they was gonna. Nosir, they didn't, noways. When I seen the stuff in that section on my first round last night I said to myself that it musta come in that very day."

Fowler put his hands on his hips and glared wrathfully at old Charlie.

"So the stuff never came in, as far as you're concerned, eh? So what you told Molkov about the object for storage in 25 not arriving was the truth as far as you knew it? So that tremendous, eh, whateverthehellitis, was moved into the warehouse and you never even knew it, eh?" His voice rose to a sarcastic, blistering crescendo. "It couldn't have been that you were asleep or drunk, or both, could it?"

Old Charlie looked shocked and reproachful and a little guilty.

"Now, Mister Fowler, you know I don't git drunk on the job. An, as fer sleeping, waal, I coulda dozed a mite, that night. But I'da sure heard 'em if they moved in that big whatchamacallut!"

But Fowler wasn't to be stopped. He was on the rampage.

"You don't drink on the job to the point where you get drunk, eh? Is that your story, eh? Oh, no. Like hell you don't! You get so drunk you walk in here and tell me eighty people just disappeared into thin air!"

OLD Charlie started to protest this injustice. But Fowler cut him off.

"God knows I've tried to be decent and tolerant with my help around here, Charlie," Fowler raged. "But, by God, when I'm taken advantage of, and made a jackass of, when I'm told by a drunken night watchman that eighty people disappeared into thin air after entering the warehouse—and then expected to believe it—it is TOO much!"

This time Charlie got a word of protest out.

"But—" he began.

Fowler cut him off. "I've got every right in the world to fire you, Charlie, and I think I might at that. You go home and take a week off. Come back here at the end of that time, and if I go crazy I'll hire you back. A week layoff should make you adopt a few reforms. It depends on those reforms if I take you back or not."

Old Charlie looked at the still-angry glint in his employer's eyes, mentally deciding that there wasn't anything he could do or say in defense of his actions in the face of Fowler's present mood. The old night watchman sighed. Once before, ole' Fowler had fired him for a week. It had had something to

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do with a small fire in the back of the warehouse. Old Charlie had dozed through the blaze until it was reported by the inhabitants of a building across the street. Yep, ole' Fowler had been sore that time, awright. But he'd hired old Charlie back after a few days or so.

"Yup. Yup. If that's the way you feel about it, Mr. Fowler, guess there ain't nothing I kin say," old Charlie declared sadly.

"Now, for the love of God, get out of my sight!" Fowler snapped despairingly.

Fowler heaved a sigh of relief as old Charlie shuffled out of the door. Then, running a badly trembling hand through the place where his hair had once been, Fowler wiped the tiny beads of perspiration from his bald dome.

Everything was getting out of control. Everything—including Fowler's sanity. The two sleepless nights Lucius Fowler had already spent as a result of Mr. Santospedros and the mysterious object of storage, were capped, so to speak, by crazy old Charlie's drunken babbling and inefficiency.

Of course Fowler was aware that the persons Charlie had admitted to work on the object in section 25 had not, *could* not, have disappeared into thin air. They had all undoubtedly gone out just the way they'd entered—past Charlie. And they had probably gotten much amusement from the old night watchman's drunken snoring.

It occurred to Fowler, then, to wonder if he could trust his ex-night watchman's estimate of the number of people who'd presented cards from Mr. Santospedros to admit them into the warehouse. Almost eighty sounded like an awful lot. What would eighty people possibly have to do on the object in section 25?

And yet, once again, what in the hell *was* the object?

For the first time since receiving the money from Mr. Santospedros, Lucius Fowler found himself wondering if all this excruciating mental torment was worth five thousand dollars.

LUCIUS FOWLER took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and started into his warehouse storage rooms. He was sick and tired of all this. Damned sick and tired. He was going to find out what it was all about, or else.

The steady, determined measure of his tread sounded his indignation in the echoes through the warehouse. And, by the time he had gone the length of the huge storage room, it had signaled his arrival to the blond, handsome young giant who guarded the object in section 25.

When Fowler saw him step out into the aisle, his heart sank, his determination ebbed. He'd forgotten about this angle.

"Good morning," said the young man pleasantly enough.

"Humph," snorted Fowler. "Can't say that it is."

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Fowler?" asked the blond young giant cordially.

"You can get out of my way and permit me to have a look at that whatever-it-is stored on *my* property in *my* warehouse," snapped Fowler.

The young man smiled. "You insist on forgetting that my boss, Mr. Santospedros, has rented section 25 from you, Mr. Fowler. It isn't your property until the rental expires. The rental won't expire for a month."

Fowler really hadn't expected to be permitted to pry into the strange object occupying section 25. But there hadn't been any harm in trying. Now something else occurred to him, and he

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glared at the blond young giant suspiciously.

"Say, when did you get here this morning? I didn't see you arrive, and neither did my watchman," Fowler declared.

The blond young man grinned. "I didn't arrive this morning. I've been here ever since this object was placed in section 25."

"You mean to say you've been staying here straight through?" Fowler demanded. "You mean to say you were here last night, the night before, yesterday, and now today?"

The young man smiled and nodded.

"That's ridiculous!" Fowler snapped. "Look at you. Clothes neatly pressed, clean shirt, not a trace of a need for a shave. Don't tell me you've been living in a dirty warehouse for almost three days without getting mussed up and dirty!"

The young man continued to grin, shrugging.

Fowler suddenly had another idea. He'd find out about last night.

"Did almost eighty people come here last night to, ah, work on that whatever-it-is there?" Fowler demanded.

The young man nodded. "Seventy-five was the exact number, I believe. Your night watchman admitted them."

Fowler was taken slightly aback. "What could that many people find to work on in that, that tall thingamajig behind you?" he demanded bewilderedly.

The young man grinned even more broadly. "Nothing," he admitted. "Nobody said they worked on it. The person who's to work on it should arrive tonight. Mr. Santospedros has finally located a man he thinks capable of fixing it."

Lucius Fowler digested the words. Then he bleated: "What?"

The young man nodded. "That's right. The chap will probably be here to fix it tonight."

"I don't mean that," Fowler snapped. "I mean the seventy-five people who came here last night. The seventy-five people who, by your own admission, didn't work on the thing." He took a deep, indignant breath. "What about them? Why did they come here?"

The blond young giant grinned.

"Maybe they just wanted to look at it," he suggested. "Or maybe Mr. Santospedros wanted them to look at it. And maybe it's about time that you stop asking questions and get back to your office where you belong."

"Listen here—" Fowler began.

The smiling young man put a massive hand gently on his chest.

"Run along," he said amiably.

Sickly, Fowler realized that there was nothing to do but run along. Without another word, or a backward glance, he turned and stalked off. He thought he heard the young man's amused chuckle follow behind him. . . .

THE rest of the day passed torturously for Lucius Fowler. For not only was his mind beset with plaguing, unanswerable questions of the most tantalizing variety, but his suspicions were now busily at work.

"I might be playing right into the hands of a ruthless gang of cutthroats," Fowler thought worriedly. "How do I know that they aren't gunmen? Or even saboteurs? I ought to call the police. I ought to do something."

But as the day passed, Lucius Fowler didn't do anything except worry perhaps even more. He arranged to have another night watchman come on that evening to take old Charlie's place. The man who agreed to this temporary job was Pete Passondo, the

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day hamburger man at a lunch counter in the neighborhood.

"Whattsa matta with Cholly?" Pete had demanded. "Hesa no work no more?"

"Not this week, anyway," Fowler explained. "I'll probably hire him back next week, when he's resolved to go a little easier on that yocky-dock he swills."

"Okay," Pete said. "As long as I'ma not hurt Cholly, I'lla be there. Justa for a week, though."

"Just for this week," Fowler agreed. Then he told Pete when he was to start, and told him about the people who would probably present cards bearing the name of Mr. Santospedros. "You let them in, understand?" Fowler said.

"Sure, they gotta a card like that, I letta them in," Pete agreed. "Whattsa the name again?"

Fowler told him the name again, and Pete agreed to report at the correct time. That was that. Now Fowler was free to return his worries to the matter of the mystery in section 25. This he did completely, doing no further work until five thirty and time to go home.

As he left his office Fowler realized that he hadn't come any nearer to making up his mind about what to do concerning his worry. And he resolved determinedly to have it out, somehow, the following day. It was little consolation to him to realize that he'd probably spend another sleepless night over it again. . . .

FOWLER'S contemplated sleepless night became a thing of more tragic significance when he arrived at his apartment around six o'clock. The telephone was ringing insistently as he entered the hallway.

When he answered the phone, a completely unfamiliar voice demanded to know if he was the Lucius Fowler who owned the Western Scenery Warehouse which employed a night watchman named Charlie Cooper.

"Yes," Fowler answered, frowning. "I'm the same person. Why?"

"Well, you seemed to be the only one we could notify, Mr. Fowler," said the strange voice. "He had no living relatives, it seems. We don't know any of his friends, and we found your name in his wallet on his paycheck. We figured you might know what to do."

Fowler had a sick sensation in the pit of his stomach. He knew what was coming. But he asked: "What's this all about? What's wrong?"

"I'm his landlord," said the voice. "We found him in his room this afternoon, dead. He was in bed and had died peacefully. It must have been a quick heart attack."

"You mean," Fowler gasped quickly, "that old Charlie Cooper died this afternoon?"

"That was the coroner's verdict. Heart attack," said the voice. "What'll we do about him?"

"Take him," Fowler said miserably, "to a nice funeral home. Don't worry about the bill. I'll take care of all his expenses. Try to find out if he's got any relatives. I'll pay for that search. I'll be at my office tomorrow morning. Call me there and let me know what you've done."

"Sure, Mr. Fowler," said the voice. "I'll do that. Thanks. He was a nice old guy."

"Yes," Fowler admitted wretchedly. "He was a nice old guy."

As Fowler walked morosely into his living room to pour himself a drink, he knew even more certainly than before that there would be no sleep for him this night.

He almost filled the glass with scotch, and fizzed in barely a jigger of

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soda. But he knew that strong liquor wasn't going to help much. . . .

WHEN his telephone jangled again, it was almost midnight. Fowler had consumed a considerable number of drinks, but he was far from being unsteady. His mind was still perfectly clear, too perfectly clear.

He answered the telephone, and the instant the voice on the other end of the wire sounded, Fowler knew his caller was Pete Passondo, the fellow he'd gotten to take Charlie's shift while the old night watchman was being disciplined.

Pete was volubly excited.

"Mister Fowler," he said. "You gotta get down here righta way. I don'ta like whatsa go on around thisa place a bit!"

"What's wrong?" Fowler demanded, trying to keep his voice calm.

"I'ma let fifty, sixty people into the warehouse," Pete said. "They alla gotta cards like you tole me about. And then, justa little while ago, I'ma let another one in. He'sa gotta bag is foola tools. None of the others isa have tool bags. But this guy's gotta bag fool, see?"

"Sure, sure," Fowler said. "For Heaven's sakes, get on with it!"

"Well, I'ma mind my own bizzinuss, see. I'ma not go back there to section twent'a'five, see? I'ma think old Cholly can take care of anything whatsa come up back there."

Fowler cut him off. "Old Charlie? What do you mean, old Charlie?"

"He'sa one of the peoples who comes witha card likea you tole me about. I'ma surprised, and ole Charlie isn'ta say a word to me. He'sa justa hand me the card an' it reads like the others. So I letta him in."

A cold sweat stood out on Fowler's forehead. Old Charlie came there. With a card from Mr. Santospedros, just like all the other people with cards. But, but it was impossible that old Charlie could be in that warehouse now. Utterly impossible!

With a voice that cracked, Fowler demanded, "How long ago did old Charlie arrive?"

"Justa 'bout an hour ago," Pete answered.

An hour ago! But that was—No! It wasn't possible. Old Charlie was dead. Charlie had died sometime that afternoon. It was now almost midnight. He had died in the afternoon. He couldn't be at the warehouse at eleven. It was preposterous. It was—

But Pete was babbling on.

"But that'sa not important," he said. "What'sa important isa the Beeg Light!"

"Big Light?" Fowler croaked hoarsely. "What Big Light!"

"The Beeg Light that'sa light up alla back of the warehouse like it was fire, or something," Pete said excitedly. "Thisa Beeg Light scare me, and I runna back along the outside of the warehouse until I can look inna the windows. I think maybe fire isa break out. But it isa no fire. It'sa the thing in section twent'a'five. The beeg theeng that'sa stored there."

"The—the object in section twenty-five?" Fowler choked.

"Yes. That'sa what'sa make the Beeg Light. It'sa so bright I'ma not able to see it. It'sa just one beeg glare."

"What was it?" Fowler gasped.

"That'sa what I'ma say. I'ma *not able* to tell what's it is. It'sa *too bright!*"

"But what," Fowler implored, "about the people you let in? What about the people who showed you the cards? Were they around the thing?"

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"No. That'sa nother things which isa scare me," Pete exclaimed. "They'sa alla gone. Not one of them isa there. *It'sa like they's disappeared!*"

"How long ago did all this come to your attention?" Fowler managed.

"Justa four, five minute ago," Pete said. "I'ma get scared. So I run to drugstore anna call you right queek!"

"Hang on!" Fowler begged. "Go back there to the warehouse and stand by. I'll be right down!"

THE cab which brought Fowler to the warehouse screeched up in front of the place exactly fifteen minutes after Pete's telephone call. Leaping from the vehicle almost before it had completely stopped, Fowler threw the startled driver a five dollar bill.

The lights of the warehouse office were on. But Pete Passondo was standing out in front, obviously waiting for Fowler.

"Get out your keys, Pete!" Fowler gasped. "We're going back to section 25!"

As they hurried through the front office, Fowler paused long enough to throw the central lighting switch which illuminated the entire length of the warehouse storage rooms. Pete's sigh of relief at this was lost in the jangle of keys which Fowler had taken from him.

Then they were in the warehouse and dashing down the block-long aisle toward the back of the place and section 25. Behind him, Fowler heard Pete's breathless and startled exclamation.

"The Beeg Light, she'sa gone!"

Fowler had already noted this much. If there'd been a light of the intensity described by Pete over the telephone, he'd have noticed it even as he entered the warehouse front office. But he held his breath and hurried on.

At section 25, they came to an abrupt and startled halt.

Section 25—the place where the mysterious whatever-it-was had been stored—*was totally vacant.*

Peter muttered a brief prayer. Fowler was too shocked to gasp. He could only stare gawpingly at the vacant sector.

"Looka, there'sa the bag foola tools!" Pete suddenly exclaimed.

And then Fowler saw it. A small tool bag, open and on the floor at about the center of where the mysterious storage object had been. Just the open tool bag, and nothing more.

Slowly, Fowler moved over to the bag. Pete followed cautiously behind him. Fowler stooped and peered into the bag. Save for a small locksmith's bore, there was nothing else inside.

Stooping down beside the bag, Fowler suddenly saw the small deposit of white, glistening dust. It was scarcely more than a handful, but its glitter was amazing.

Fowler picked up a little of it. He held it in his hand and let it sift through his fingers. It seemed like the dust that pearl shavings, mother-of-pearl shavings, that is, would make. Fowler straightened up, the expression on his face unreadable. He was thinking of old Charlie Cooper who had died that afternoon, and yet was here this evening. He was thinking of the single locksmith's tool left in the bag. He was thinking of Mr. Santospedros, and the Big Light that the mysterious storage object had made. A glitter that must have been that dust magnified a thousand times as it appeared on the surface of the huge object in section 25.

Locksmiths, locks, doors, gates.

Dust, pearly dust. Dust that had been scattered by the locksmith's bore.

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Locks, bores, doors, gates? Dust, pearly dust.

Pearly Gates!

Chill fingers softly stroked their way along Fowler's spine. He was thinking of old Charlie Cooper again, and of the others, considerably more than a hundred of them, who had come to the warehouse with a card like the one Pete said old Charlie brought.

A card that bore the name Santos-pedros.

Santos-pedros. Santos Pedros. In Latin, Santos Pedros was a name. The name of the keeper of the Pearly Gates—Saint Peter.

Fowler realized that whatever minor repair job which had been necessary on the Pearly Gates, had probably been taken care of by the locksmith. And he realized, fuzzily, why Saint Peter, or Mr. Santospedros, had stored them while he sought for the right locksmith to do the job. Stored them here in the Fowler warehouse.

The job was done. The gates were gone. But while they'd been here in the warehouse, their utility couldn't cease. Hence the people with cards admitting them to the warehouse, and the Pearly Gates.

In spite of the utter nervous breakdown which he already felt descending on him, Lucius Fowler managed to smile faintly. Old Charlie had come with the card. Old Charlie Cooper had been admitted. Fowler was glad the old duffer had made it. . . .

SYNTHETIC CHEMISTRY

THE synthetic products can never be kept out of the news. Chemists in these industries work too hard and produce too many good results for the situation to be otherwise.

One of the latest announcements is that *urea,* a synthetic chemical, today is helping to make an important farm-grown product more useful for both war and peace-time purposes. Not even manufactured in the United States until recent years, this chemical has won new prominence for its ability to inhibit splitting and checking of lumber during the necessary seasoning of drying process. It can also treat wood so that it may be bent and shaped for certain specific war uses.

The Navy has adopted urea in many of its operations. It is using thousands and thousands of feet of treated lumber for decks, ribs, frames, and other structural parts of ships. Auxiliary stocks of treated lumber are being carried on board Navy vessels for emergency repairs of the ships themselves and for building and repairing docks, landings, and other facilities.

The Army, too, has blessed the synthetic chemists in their new adoption. It is purchasing treated lumber in clear and structural grades for such uses as stringers, planks, and rails on army pontoon bridges. (Without the chemical, government officials have been told, it would have been almost impossible for the lumber industry to supply the government with all the lumber requested for army pontoons.) The companies that have attempted drying this material without urea experienced seasoning degrades of 40 to 60 percent of the stock dried, and, in addition, tied up their dry kilns for an unreasonably long time.

The use of urea in treating lumber has resulted in the reduction of kiln degrade to about 3 percent.

Recently, it has been heard that the Forest Products Research Laboratory is treating green white oak, red oak, and sap gum lumber with urea. The wood is being subjected to controlled drying conditions in modern dry kilns. This operation on these materials are made with the consideration that urea-treated lumber can be used in the construction of war plants throughout the country. Large contractors, in fact, have already been thinking of using it in their war work.

Urea can be used in many other channels—in urea formaldehyde resins, adhesives, and textile treatment. In normal times, its chief agricultural use is to supply leaching-resistant nitrogen in commercially mixed fertilizers, essential for the growing of large yields of various farm crops needed to feed, clothe, and supply the people of the United States and foreign nations.

It has outstanding medical values, too, of special interest to physicians and veterinarians. Experiments show that urea supplies protein feed for cattle, sheep, and other animals.

Urea has many other agricultural potentialities, too. All in all, it adds up to a mighty powerful chemical weapon—both in aiding the war effort and in reconstructing a more peaceful and secure world.

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ROMANCE OF THE ELEMENTS . . . Phosphorus

PHOSPHORUS is number 15 in the International Table of Atomic Weights. Its symbol is P and its atomic weight is 31.027. It may be prepared in different forms, but the two commonest are white phosphorus and red phosphorus. It is a translucent, wax-like substance. It is soft at ordinary temperatures and may be cut with a knife. Its specific gravity is 1.83, its melting point 44°, its boiling point 287°. White phosphorus is extremely poisonous. It must be kept under water, since it burns in oxygen at body temperature. Valuable in munitions.

(Next Month: The Romance of Oxygen)

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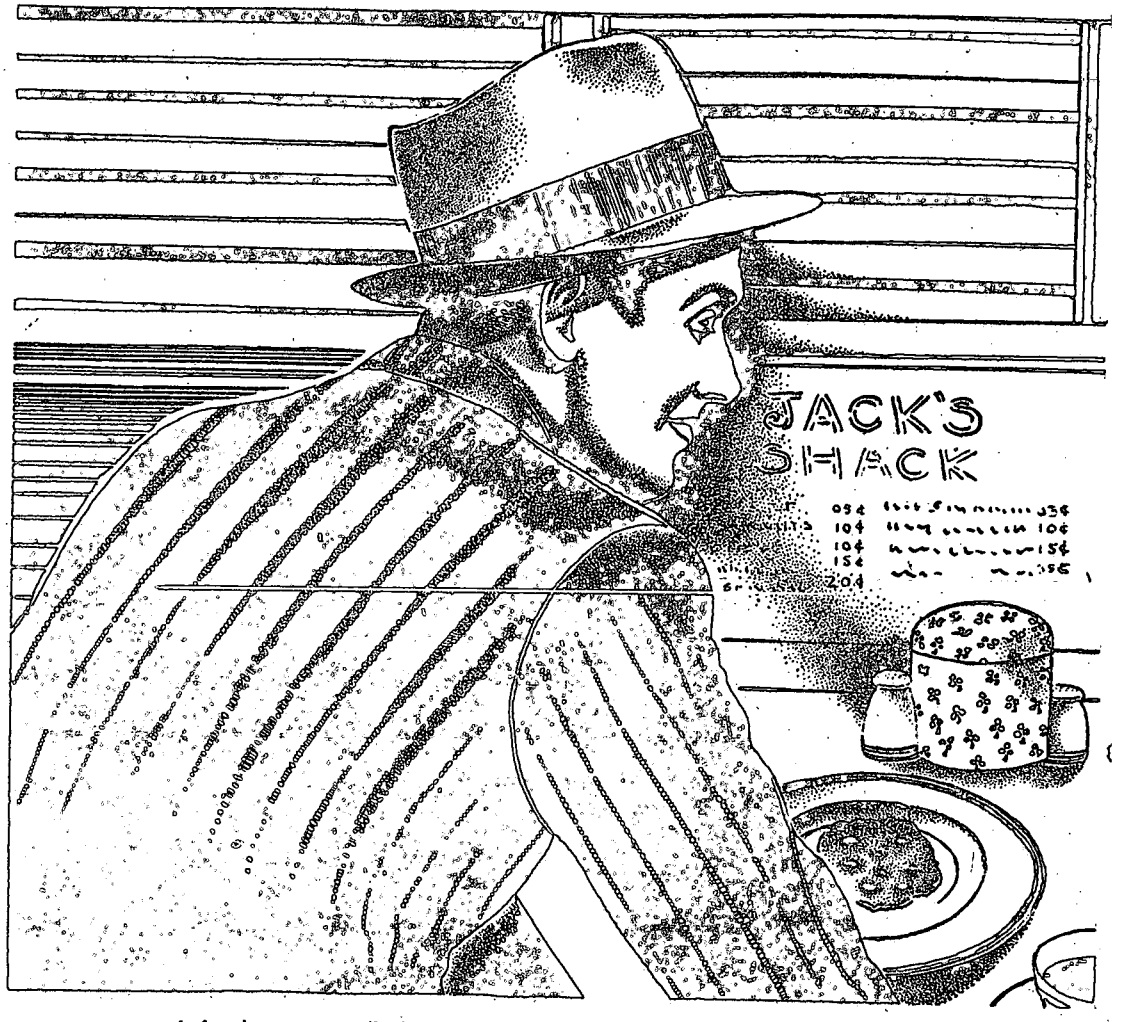
LEFTY FEEP and



Lefty shows me a roll of money. "I win it on the races," he explains

Lefty had a swell idea for making money on the races. He would use a robot for a jockey to save weight. But the robot fell in love with a window dummy, and when she was kidnaped, Lefty's plans went haywire!

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the RACING ROBOT

by ROBERT BLOCH

JACK'S SHACK was almost empty the other night, and so was I. I ordered a stack of wheat cakes and began to wade into them with a knife, fork, and lots of gusto.

Somewhere between the fourth and fifth wheat cake I suddenly noticed a human thumb. The thumb wriggled up and down, pressing the fifth wheat cake back on the plate.

A voice assailed my ears.

"Send back the platter—don't eat this batter."

I raised my head quickly and stared.

Lefty Feep was standing at the side of my table. The tall, angular indoor sportsman was grinning broadly.

"Lefty Feep!" I exclaimed. "You're a sight for sore eyes!"

And he was. Feep was wearing a

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creation designed to make anybody's eyes sore. A checkered overcoat, striped trousers, and polka-dot spats hung on his frame, reading from top to bottom. He was carrying a huge cigar, and as I looked, he puffed fifty cents worth of smoke into my face.

"Do not make with the cakes," Feep insisted, pushing my plate aside. He signalled for a waiter.

"Me and my friend here wish a few pounds of caviar," he ordered.

The waiter's mouth hung open.

"Also tell the chef to go out and catch a couple humming birds by the tongue. Female humming birds—they are more delicate, if you follow me."

The waiter followed, with a sarcastic grin.

"Caviar and humming birds' tongues you say? I suppose you want some champagne, too, with a little Chinese lettuce on the side — you mooching bum!"

Lefty Feep disregarded the criticism. "Champagne is a good idea," he nodded. "But forget us with the lettuce. I got plenty of lettuce right here."

Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a big wad of bills.

The waiter retreated as Feep sat down next to me.

"Quite a roll you've got there," I remarked.

"Sure," said Feep. "It looks good even without butter."

Curiosity got the better of me. "Where in the world did you make all this money?" I demanded.

Feep shrugged. "It's in the bag with a nag."

"How?"

"My hay starts to pay."

"What do you mean, in English?"

"I win a horse-race," he explained.

"But I thought you usually lost on the races," I remarked.

"Usually I do," admitted Lefty Feep. "In fact up to recently I figure the only way I can clean up on a horse is to become a street-sweeper."

"But you were lucky this time?"

"Smart is the word, buddy." Feep beamed. "Let me tell you how it all happens. It is amazing and amusing."

I got up hastily. I could smell another story coming on. "Some other time, perhaps," I mumbled. "Must go now. I've got a blind date."

"She must be, if she goes out with you," Feep retorted.

I tried to dodge, but his outstretched foot tripped me back into my seat.

"There. Now you are comfortable," said Lefty Feep. "So kindly flap your ears to these remarkable remarks."

And as I flapped my ears, Lefty Feep flapped his tongue and began to speak.

IT ALL starts out one day last week when I am strolling down the street enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. I might as well enjoy sunshine and fresh air, since my landlady puts me out of my room.

It seems I do not make a dent in my rent lately, but this does not bother me half as much as the strolling. You see I am strolling on my hands and knees. The idea is I am trying to look like a dog, so my creditors won't know me.

At the moment I happen to be crouching next to a lamp post, cursing the name of Gorilla Gabface.

This is not the first time I take Gorilla Gabface's name in vain, because he plays plenty of unwashed tricks on me before. But this last trick is the worst—it is the reason why I am down and out. Down on my knees and out of my room.

Because Gorilla Gabface lately buys himself a race horse. Naturally he tells me about it and I take a look at the plug. To me the nag has all the earmarks of a phony pony, and I tell Gab-

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face so. He gets sore and suggests I place a slight wager against the horse if I don't like it.

Which I do, playing the favorite in a race the next day. And Gorilla Gabface's horse beats the favorite.

I cannot figure this out, because his horse is such a fugitive from a milk-wagon. So the next day I bet again and Gabface's horse comes in. And the next day.

The result is I am now flat broke. And I am just beginning to figure out why. Gabface is crookeder than a Jap diplomat, and I now realize he must be doping his horse. Also he is using a lightweight jockey and weighing him in with lead in his ears and mouth.

This I realize. But I also realize it is too late for me to do anything about it. Gorilla Gabface is still winning races, and all I can do is run races with my creditors.

So there I am, crouching by the lamp post and wondering if I can find a bone somewhere.

Then I happen to look up and I see the sign.

"HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE."

And all at once I remember that this is the place where Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch have their laboratory. They are a couple of scientific Americans—two professors without a quiz show. They are always cooking up some screwy idea or theory, and I happen to recall that I once collect fifty bucks from them when I assist in an experiment.

The experiment doesn't work, but neither do I—and I get the fifty bucks anyway.

So that gives me an idea. Why not stroll into the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE and see if they are bouncing any screwballs today?

I get up off my knees faster than I do in a dice-game when somebody looks at my dice. In two minutes I am up the stairs and in the laboratory.

The outer room is empty. So I push in the other door and take a look.

SYLVESTER SKEETCH and Mordecai Meetch are bending over a big white table. They are wearing dark glasses and those scientific nightgowns. A big light shines down on the table, and also shines on the knives and saws in their hands. Skeetch is sewing something up and mumbling to himself.

I tiptoe over and sneak a peek.

Then I give a gulp.

They have a body on the table and they are sewing it up!

Absolutely—there is a guy lying out on the table, and they are cross-stitching his neck for him!

"Hippocrates' oath!" I mutter, or some such profanity.

Skeetch and Meetch wheel around. Their glasses glare. Then they recognize me. Meetch smiles.

"Well, if it isn't Feep!" he says. "Glad to see you again."

I can only stare at the body on the table.

"What kind of morgue *smorgasbord* are you cooking up there?" I gasp, which is something to gasp.

"Nothing at all," Meetch answers. "How's our patient, Skeetch?"

"Fine."

"Patient?" I say.

"Well, you might call him that." Meetch turns around. "Ready to get up now?"

Sure enough—I see that the guy on the table is smiling. He nods when Meetch talks to him. I stand there waiting for his sewed head to fall off, but it doesn't.

Instead the guy sits up then stands up.

So does my hair.

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"Feep," says Skeetch, "Shake hands with Robert."

I look at Robert. He stands stiff-jointed with a very wooden smile on his face. But he holds out his hand and I grab it. We shake very gently.

He stops shaking hands.

I don't.

Then I look down at my hand to see what I am holding. His arm! It comes off at the shoulder!

"Curse it!" yells Meetch. "You aren't glued tight enough!"

He grabs the arm, grabs Robert, and throws him down on the table again. Skeetch runs over with a big can of glue and another needle.

I can't bear to look. I cover my eyes.

SKEETCH taps me on the shoulder after a while.

"Peekaboo," he says. "You can come out now. It's all right."

"All right?" I say. "Tearing guys arms off is all right? I guess I don't know my own strength."

Skeetch laughs.

"Take a look," he suggests.

I look. Robert is back on his feet. The arm is on again.

"Ulp!" I remark.

Meetch chuckles. "You're fooled too," he grins. "You think Robert is a man, eh?"

"What else?"

"Well, he's not. He's our newest invention, that's all."

"Invention?"

"Of course. Feep—meet Robert the Robot."

"A robot—one of those mechanical men?"

Meetch nods.

"But aren't they always some kind of tin or steel? And don't you have to press a lot of buttons to make them work?"

"Not any more," Skeetch tells me. "Robert the Robot is made out of nothing but wires, electrical batteries, synthetic brain and nerve tissue, reclaimed rubber, and plastic wood."

"Plastic wood?"

"Feel his face and hands. Marvelous likeness, isn't it? Very artistic modeling, just like flesh."

"But he's alive—he can talk and move—"

"Of course. The synthetic brain and nerve tissue takes care of that. Certain embolistic difficulties must be accounted for, and there's a synaptic differential to be eliminated or compensated for but—"

Meetch interrupts.

"Never mind all that," he says. "What Skeetch is trying to tell you is—we are successful. We create a synthetic human being, a robot. Robert the Robot is the latest scientific achievement, the crowning triumph of this Institute!"

Robert the Robot smiles and bows.

I shrug my shoulders. "Very interesting," I admit. "But now what? What are you going to do with this plastic personality?"

Skeetch scratches his noggin.

"There is an important point. I haven't the faintest idea of what to do with Robert the Robot."

"Neither have I," Meetch chimes in. "Of course we must examine his potentialities. See what kind of a brain he has. Why right now he's as simple as a new-born babe."

Robert the Robot stands there with a silly grin on his wooden puss.

"But he walks and talks," I object. "That is not simple."

"Part of the process already under control," Skeetch says. "He can speak and understand—but he cannot think. Or can he? That is something we must find out about. What can a robot like

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this do? What is he capable of? What are his limitations?"

"I dunno," says Robert the Robot, fingering the suit of clothes they put on him.

"There's the answer!" Meetch sighs. "He dunno! Skeetch, it's going to be a terrific problem studying and educating this creation of ours! A scientific check will require months of observation."

"Yes," Skeetch agrees with a groan. "And here we are, up to our necks on those rocket-ship plans, too! How are we going to sandwich in enough time to train our creation?"

RIGHT here is where I get an idea.

"Why not let me show Robert the Robot around?" I suggest.

"You?"

"Why not? I am in the know. I can teach him plenty. I can show him the ropes. For a small fee, of course."

Meetch looks at Skeetch. Skeetch looks at Meetch. Neither of them are getting any bargain from this exchange of glances. But Skeetch speaks.

"You might do it. But will you take care of Robert for us? Will you check his reactions regularly?"

"Not only his reactions but also his oil," I promise.

"No need for that. Robert the Robot is self-operating. No gears, no cogs, nothing to wind up, nothing to run down. No food, water, oil, nothing to plug in."

"Wrap it up," I order. "That's for me."

"All right," says Meetch. "Here's fifty dollars. Take Robert the Robot for a week and see if you can teach him anything."

"From me he'll learn plenty," I assure him. "All the angles and lots of curves, too."

"We expect a full report," Skeetch warns me.

"You'll get it."

So they hand me fifty smackeroos and I waltz down the stairs with Robert the Robot at my heels.

When we get out to the doorway, I turn and take a squint at Robert again.

He doesn't look bad. In his blue suit and white shirt he resembles a window-dummy—but a high class window-dummy. The plastic wood face and hands look like the real flesh. He has nice eyes and a cheerful smile. Not exactly a movie star, but he will pass in a crowd. There is a little glue around his neckline, but not enough to attract attention. A very remarkable personality—this Robert the Robot.

But looks are not everything, and I figure I won't take any chances. If he is going to be my pal for a week, I might as well wise him up a little. I do not wish for him to make any bad breaks in society, and it is my job to see that he is Emily Posted.

"Well, Robert," I tell him. "Here we go into the big city."

"What's a city?" he asks, with a straight face.

"What's a city? Why a city is—a lot of buildings with mortgages on them. A place where people live."

"What are people?"

"People? Why, persons. Human beings. Like me."

"You're a human being?"

"Don't say it in that nasty tone of voice. Of course I am. And you are going to pretend that you're one, too."

"What do human beings do?"

"Why, I eat and sleep."

"What are they?"

"Eating is something you do with food after cooking it."

"What's cooking?"

SLANG he talks! So I explain about food and eating, and then I explain

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sleeping.

He shakes his head. "I don't see anything in it," he tells me. "I will not eat or sleep. What else do people do?"

"They work." So I tell him about jobs and working.

"But why do they work?"

"In order to get money so they can eat and sleep."

Robert the Robot grins. "People are silly then," he decides. "I don't want to be a people."

"Person," I correct him. "Watch your grammar. People means a whole snag of finks. A person is just one lug."

"Finks and lugs," the Robot mumbles.

"Come on, let's walk around for a while," I suggest.

And off we go on a conducted tour. It is the first time I ever show a Robot the sights of the big city, but he is not a bad guy as dummies go. It really gives me a bang to point out the joints, and Robert gets quite enthusiastic.

What really gives him the old jolt is the machinery. The cars and busses and trains are quite a thrill. Being a robot, naturally he is interested in mechanical stuff. So we watch neon signs and adding machines and I take him over to see a printing press and a couple factories. In fact, it is after dark before I manage to tear him away from a clothes-pin factory.

We stand outside and wait for a car near a drug-store. Robert the Robot happens to notice the weighing machine.

"What is that?" he asks.

So of course I have to explain what a weighing machine is. And just for fun I slip a penny in the slot and let him weigh himself. A card comes out with his weight on it.

Robert the Robot weighs 85 lbs.

That is curious. Here is a robot, looking like a full-grown man, and he only weighs 85 pounds. The plastic wood, of course.

"You're quite a lightweight," I remark. "Funny."

Only on second thought it isn't funny.

It's wonderful!

"Eighty-five pounds!" I yell. "Come on, Robert—we're going places!"

"Home?" he asks.

"No, not home," I answer. "We are going to the amusement park!"

And that is just where we do go.

I TAKE Robert the Robot out to the carnival. Nobody notices him, of course, or thinks he is any different. They do not realize he is a robot. They also do not realize he is a gold-mine—but I do.

I get him into the carnival and I throw him on the merry-go-round right away. Put him right on the wooden horses.

"This is nice," he tells me, sliding up and down and hanging onto the brass pole.

"Let go the pole and see if you can ride," I suggest.

He does. He can ride.

We go around again.

"Why are we doing this?" asks Robert the Robot.

"You'll find out," I answer.

Because I know what I'm doing. I'm teaching Robert the Robot how to ride.

Here is a robot who looks like a human being. He only weighs 85 pounds. If he can ride—what a jockey he will make!

I can put weights on him when he weighs in that will make him plenty heavy. Then I remove them and he goes back to just 85 pounds on a horse. And Gorilla Gabface, for all his crookedness, can't get a jockey weighing 85 pounds. I will enter a race, bet with

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Gabface, and let the robot ride a horse I put my money on. It's a cinch.

After I give Robert the Robot a few more riding lessons I hustle him out of the carnival. We walk along the street and I explain my plan to him.

I tell him what a race is, and what live horses are, and how to handle one.

"Tomorrow you will ride like that," I finish up. "You will win a lot of money. That means plenty of groceries and a nice place to sleep."

Robert the Robot shakes his wooden head.

"But I do not like groceries and I never sleep," he complains. "Besides, I am not sure that one of these horses, as you call them, is safe for me. My arms might fall off again."

"You'll like it," I argue.

"No. I rather look at some more machinery," says Robert the Robot. "Beautiful wheels and pistons."

"Beautiful baloney!" I sneer.

"Yes," whispers Robert the Robot. "Beautiful."

"What?" I turn my head.

"A beautiful baloney, you call her?" breathes Robert the Robot.

He is staring off into space. I squint and follow his gaze.

Robert the Robot is looking into a department store window. He is gawking at a window dummy standing there. A blonde window dummy with long false eyelashes, wearing a negligee.

"A beautiful baloney," he whispers.

"You are wrong, Robert," I correct him. "Women are not baloneys. They are generally referred to in polite circles as tomatoes. Or wenches. Or ginch. Of course, this one is just a window dumm—"

THEN I catch myself in time. Because another idea hits me.

"Robert," I whisper.

He does not hear me, he is so busy giving this window dummy the old eye.

"Robert, do you like her?"

"Oh, yes," he sighs. "I like her."

Yes, I am right. He doesn't know any better—he falls for this window dummy. So I go right ahead with my idea.

"Robert, how would you like to have her for a girl friend?"

"Girl friend?"

I start to explain what a girl friend is, but I don't need to. He catches on. He shakes his head so fast the stitches nearly break on his neck. And almost cracks his plastic lips with a smile.

"I will see to it," I promise. "If you will run this race tomorrow for me."

"Well—"

"Think of it, Robert! She will be sitting up in the grandstand watching you ride. Watching you win! You'll be a hero!"

"Do you think she'll like me?" asks Robert. "I can't seem to get her to smile at me."

Then I catch on. *He* thinks the window dummy is alive, the way he is!

"She's marvelous," he breathes. "Wonderful how she manages to stand still all this time without ever moving."

"Sure," I agree. "Most women won't stand still for a minute."

"Why doesn't she talk?" he asks.

"Listen," I tell him. "When you hang around dames as long as I do, you will be grateful to find one who doesn't talk."

"Maybe so," says Robert the Robot.

"Well, then, how about it?" I ask, giving him the needle. "If she comes along, will you ride in a race tomorrow?"

"Yes," he says.

So I pat him on his wooden back

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and dash into the department store. It is closed, of course, but I locate the watchman and the head designer. I tell the head designer I wish to buy his window dummy.

"You want that dummy?" ask the designer jerk.

"Well," I say, kind of embarrassed, "I don't really want it. It's for a friend. A present—like a doll."

"Awfully big for a doll," says the designer jerk.

"I have an awfully big friend," I explain.

So to make a long story short, I finally walk off with the dummy for twenty bucks. This is a lot of hay, but I figure I will be making bales of hay when the sun shines on the race-track tomorrow.

In a few minutes I am back on the street, dragging the dummy across my back.

"Robert, meet your new girl friend," I say. "Here she is."

"What's her name?" he asks, very gullible.

"Oh—her name is Roberta," I tell him.

He reaches out to shake hands. I wag the dummy's arm.

"Can't she walk?" he inquires.

"Have a heart," I explain. "The poor girl stands on her feet all day long. She is tired."

"I am not tired."

"You are not a woman," I snap. "No, I will carry her home. She must be ready to go to the race tomorrow."

I DO carry her home. I give the landlady the back rent and she gives me a little back talk, and then I settle Robert the Robot in one room and lock Roberta the window-dummy in the other room.

"Got to keep it proper," I tell Robert. "Now I must go out and make final arrangements."

Which is just what I do.

I head for the stable.

I am looking for a personality by the name of Horse-Sense Homer, a dear friend of mine who is quite a jack around the track. He owns a horse of his own—a nag if there ever was one—and I fancy he will be currying him in a hurry tonight.

Which he is. I step into the stable and the first person I recognize is Horse-Sense Homer himself. I do not see him in the dark but I can tell he is a stable man, because he has such an air about him.

"Homer," I yell. "It's me—Lefty Feep!"

He turns on a lantern and I see he is lying down on the straw, asleep. Next to him is his scrawny horse.

"Who's your friend?" I inquire.

Horse-Sense Homer smiles. "The best nag I own," he tells me. "The name is *Glue Factory.*"

"You're telling me?"

"A great horse," he insists. "Watch her win tomorrow."

"Got a good jockey?"

"Fair. I'm depending on *Glue Factory,* though."

"Well, I've got your troubles all packed up," I tell him. "I just pick up a jockey for you."

"Pick up?"

"With one hand," I assure him. "He's that light."

"No midgets."

"A full-grown man," I come back. "Great rider, too. You can't lose. He only weighs 85 pounds."

"85 pounds?"

"A wonder. And just to show you how much confidence I have in him, I'm going to bet all your money on winning."

"All my money, eh? With who?"

"Gorilla Gabface," I answer. "He

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is racing his steed against you, is he not?"

"Right," says Horse-Sense Homer, frowning. "You know I am a little afraid. That horse of his, *Cut Plug*, is a pretty fast filly."

"Don't be silly with that filly!" I sneer.

"But Gabface's horse always wins."

"Not now he doesn't. Not with my 85-pound jockey."

"Well, Lefty, wait a minute now—"

"No time to wait. Got to place the bet." I grab his wallet and run off. He stares after me, shaking his head.

I SHAKE my feet back to town and into Gorilla Gabface's pool parlor where he hangs out, particularly around the chins.

And there sits the fat slob himself, grinning from ear to ear. When I walk in he laughs.

"Well if it isn't Lefty Feep," he cracks. "And pretty sagging, too! What's the matter, Lefty—you lose your racing form?"

I just hand him the onion eye.

"I guess my *Cut Plug* teaches you a lesson at the track today," he chuckles. "Maybe now you will learn to stop horsing around."

Then I give it to him.

"Listen, Gabface. Is it true that you plan to enter that horse-doctor's delight of yours in tomorrow's race?"

"The fifth race, to be exact," Gabface answers. "And what is it to you? Want to make a bet on him winning?"

"No," I come back. "But I will make a little wager with you that *Cut Plug* gets beat by another steed."

"Such as which?"

"I am betting on *Glue Factory*," I tell him.

"Glue Factory?" Gabface laughs again and several windows fall out. "Why that oat-burner does not win a race since Paul Revere sells her back in 1776."

"She wins tomorrow," I state. "Do you wish to amble into a gamble?"

"I will bet against you Feep," Gabface sneers. "What amount do you wish to wager? A dime? Or does somebody hand you a quarter?"

"I will bet $500," I tell him.

Gabface sits up.

"Where do you get $500 and how do you hide the body?" he scoffs.

"Here is the dough." I wave the wallet at him.

He smiles. "All right. It's a bet. I will see you at the track tomorrow with my wheelbarrow. I need it to carry the winnings in."

He jerks his head all at once.

"Who is the jockey?" he asks. "Horse-Sense Homer's regular boy?"

"I got a new jockey for this race," I tell him. "Fellow by the name of Robert."

"Never hear of him."

"You will," I predict. And walk out.

SO the deal is fixed. I put up the dough, the bet is on, and all I do now is arrange final details. The next morning I go down and get racing togs for Robert the Robot and have him weighed in. I put a few weights inside his stomach and sew him back up and he tips the scales at 125. While we weigh Gabface comes in with his jockey. He also tips the scales at 125, but he has a mouthful of pennies or something and does not say anything. I figure he really goes for about 118—and with Robert the Robot at 85, he is a cinch to win.

Gabface doesn't think so. He comes over and looks at Robert. Robert is nothing much to look at. His wooden face and painted smile do not show up very well in the daylight, and he moves

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very stiff and awkward, just as anybody would if they had wooden hips.

"So this is your new jockey?" grins Gabface, looking Robert up and down. He stares hard, and for a minute I am afraid he will realize that Robert, in spite of the plastic wood, is just a mechanical man.

But he only sniffs and says, "Fine specimen. Must be out on a bender last night from the way his face looks. He shouldn't ride a horse today. A pink elephant is better."

I do not comment, but take Robert the Robot out of there in a speedy hurry.

"How do you feel?" I ask him.

"Feel? What's feel?" he comes back.

"Never mind. Are you ready to race today?"

"Will Roberta watch me?"

"Right in the stands with me," I promise.

This cheers him up. We go around to the stable and I introduce him to *Glue Factory* and give him a few pointers on riding. This isn't really important, because the horse will race by itself, and all that bothers it is weight. So it's a cinch.

The only one who worries now is Horse-Sense Homer. He happens to come up and say hello while Robert and I stand there.

"You the marvelous jockey Feep tells me about?" he says, slapping Robert on the back.

"Oooooh!" says Robert the Robot and falls down. One of his legs buckles and comes off at the knee.

"Jumping steeple-chase!" yells Homer. "I cripple him for life! Get a doctor—get an ambulance—police —"

"Get some glue," I tell him, very calmly.

"Glue? But his leg—"

"I will glue it on again."

"Glue a man's leg on?"

"He is only a dummy," I explain. "A robot. A mechanical man. There is nothing to worry about."

Homer takes this all in and his face turns a delicate shade of blue.

"Nothing to worry about?" he gasps. "You mean you bet my $500 that you will win a race with a dummy for a jockey?"

"But he is very smart for a dummy," I assure Homer.

"Look," I say, putting his leg back on, "he is made out of plastic wood." And bend the foot backwards. "Soft as mud."

"Don't do that," Homer shrieks. "Your name is mud, Feep! You put $500 of mine into the paws of Gorilla Gabface with this crazy stunt."

"Don't burn your bridges until you come to them," I cheer him up. "Just watch Robert the Robot race."

"I am going to close my eyes and lie down," Homer sighs.

THEN the bugle blows for the first race and I run off. I get Robert in his racing togs and pull them over his plastic body. I give him his last-minute instructions. But he looks worried.

"What about Roberta?" he says. "What about her"?

"She is waiting in the stands to see you," I needle him. "Here—she sends you this to wear."

And I pull out a part of the window dummy's wig I clip off.

"A lock of her hair!" whispers Robert the Robot. "Gee!"

"Now get in there and win," I coach. "The fifth race is coming up." And I turn him over to Homer.

Then I go back to the stands. Here I sit in a box with Roberta the window dummy next to me like I promise. I

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dig her up a nice dress to wear and drag her along to a seat. She has to be carried in, but nobody notices very much—everybody being on their feet and screaming while they watch the races.

Comes the fifth race. Comes the horses. Comes *Cut Plug* and *Glue Factory*. Comes the break at the barrier. And they're off!

Robert the Robot sails along in his saddle. *Cut Plug's* jockey gives him the old boot and spur. But *Glue Factory* takes the lead. With scarcely no weight to carry, she is really feeling her oats. I see Robert bouncing up and down and the horse gallops around the inside stretch and then heads for home.

The crowd roars. *Glue Factory* is a long shot. And *Cut Plug*, the favorite, is all shot. Because *Glue Factory* wins in a breeze. Five lengths!

"Yeeeoowee!" yells a loud voice in my ear. It turns out to be my own voice.

"I am robbed!" screams another voice from in back of me.

I turn around and see Gorilla Gabface dancing up and down on one foot in a rage polka.

"Give me the dough," I call to him, in a very sweet tone of voice.

"Why you ——" Gabface begins. But he never goes any further in his description because he suddenly notices Roberta the window dummy sitting next to me.

"Ladies present," he mumbles. "Is this your latest flame, Lefty?"

I keep Roberta's back turned. "No," I explain. "She is the— the girl-friend of my jockey."

"Oh, that dirty—" Gabface commences. And catches himself once more. He shakes his head. "I still do not see how you win," he groans. "The horse looks like it isn't carrying any weight at all."

"Pay up," I say, very patient.

"All right, Feep. You get a break this time. But it doesn't happen again."

"Oh no?" I see a chance to get really even with this crook. "What do you plan to do? Give that nag of yours a shot of dynamite in his oats to make him start off with a bang?"

"Do you mean to infer that I pull a fixed race?" Gabface grunts.

"Who cares?" I grin. "No matter what you do from now on, I win all the races."

"So? Perhaps you wish to make another bet? I am racing my horse again Saturday," Gabface snarls.

This is just what I like to hear.

"Certainly I will wager. Shall we say a cool grand this time?" I suggest.

"That is plenty icy." Gabface is hedging.

"Afraid, eh?"

"Listen you," says Gabface, sticking his chins out. "I am not afraid of man nor beast—and one of those categories must cover you. I will bet the thousand. My horse against that plug you and Homer run."

So it is a bet.

GABFACE leaves and I run down to meet Robert the Robot and Horse-Sense Homer.

Horse-Sense is very excited. He cannot believe the race is won. When I tell him about the new bet he is happier than ever.

Robert the Robot is happy, too. I bring him a whole handful of hair from the window-dummy's wig and say she pulls it out in her excitement.

He is anxious to race again.

"This is more fun than the merry-go-round," he admits.

So it is settled. Robert the Robot and Roberta the dummy go home with

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me in a cab. I keep them separated and act as chaperone when we get to my dump.

Starting early the next morning I take Robert down to the stable for a workout. Only two more days to go and I don't wish to take chances. I know Gorilla Gabface is sore, and when he gets sore he gets mean, and when he gets mean he is dangerous, and when he is dangerous there is trouble ahead.

He will do anything to win the race Saturday, I know. So the next two days I train Robert and guard him carefully. I also have Horse-Sense Homer guard his horse, too. Gorilla Gabface will not get a chance to pull any funny business, I figure. And on Friday afternoon everything is all set for the big day tomorrow.

Until we get home.

Then I discover my mistake. I spend all this time guarding Robert the Robot and the horse. Roberta is left home alone.

And when we return to the house she is gone!

Vanished!

"Where is Roberta?" squeaks Robert, hopping around the room in excitement.

"Probably she goes to the beauty parlor to get her hair fixed," I stall. "She will pull a lot out tomorrow when you win."

But I am panicky.

I jump two feet when the doorbell rings.

Then I get to the door, open it, and look out. There is no one there. But standing in the hall is Roberta.

She looks all right. Whoever takes her does no damage.

I drag her in and show her to Robert. He cheers up and stays cheerful all evening.

But I worry.

SATURDAY morning, the day of the big race, finds me down at the tracks quite early indeed. Horse-Sense Homer takes *Glue Factory* out for exercise and reports she is very fast today. Robert the Robot goes into the stables to rest. But me—I head for the stall where Gorilla Gabface keeps his oat meal-ticket.

Sure enough, there he is. And when he sees me he cannot keep the nasty grin off his puss.

"So," I accuse him. "You are the one who kidnaps my jockey's girl friend."

"Who kidnaps who?" he comes back. "Nobody puts the snatch on her. She is back, isn't she?"

"Yes," I admit. "But you grab her in the firse place."

Gabface leers.

"Maybe I do. Maybe I figure on queering the race by making your jockey feel upset about his girl friend," he hints. "But I do not realize then that the girl friend is a window dummy."

"So what? Everybody has a hobby."

"Window dummies aren't hobbies," Gabface goes on. "You know, Feep, I get to thinking when I find out this. I get to thinking about what kind of a personality might have a window dummy for a heartburn. Perhaps, I figure, he is a dummy himself."

"You're slightly but completely screwy," I suggest.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Gabface grins in his chins. "It adds up, doesn't it? Your horse races like she doesn't carry much weight."

"But a live dummy is ridiculous," I stall.

Gabface nods. "I agree with you, Feep," he tells me. "And there will be no such nonsense in today's race."

"What do you mean?"

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"I send some of the boys around to examine your jockey," he informs me.

"Hey, what do you mean?" I yell.

"Can't put anything over on me," he comes back. "See you after the race. I can use that thousand."

I do not waste any more time. I heat my feet running back to the stable where I leave Robert the Robot.

I rush in. "Robert!" I screech. "Where are you?"

No answer. I see no one in the gloom.

But as I rush across the floor I stumble. Stumble on Robert the Robot. Or what's left of Robert the Robot.

ROBERT THE ROBOT is lying in a heap on the stable floor. He does not look human any more. He resembles a small junk pile.

Gorilla's boys really interview him. In fact they tear him to pieces!

Sure enough, there is nothing on the floor but torn clothes, twisted wires and cords, and a lot of scraps of plastic wood. I bend down and pick up a handful. It kneads between my fingers.

"Poor Robert," I whisper, thinking of the Robot.

"Poor me!" I also whisper, thinking of the thousand berries.

"All set?" It is Horse-Sense Homer, running in panting. "I just get a fresh hunch we win," he announces. "So I plank one thousand more on the nose to win. Odds are three to one! We will clean up!"

"Clean up this mess," I suggest.

"What is it?" Homer asks.

"It's our jockey. That's what it is." And I explain.

"But we can't race *Glue Factory* then. We lose all our dough! And to think I put it all on her nose!"

"Wait a minute!" I stare down and get an inspiration. Crazy, but an idea.

"We need a jockey?" I say.

"Of course we do," wails Homer.

"You got one. Me."

"You—Feep?"

"Why not? I weigh about 130."

"Too much. Gabface's horse will beat us unless we get an edge in weight or something."

"We will get something," I promise him. "Robert the Robot will win for us yet."

"But he's busted and you're riding."

"Leave it to me," I promise him.

The bugle sounds.

"Hurry up—where's the nag?" I yell, picking up what is left of Robert the Robot and dashing for the stable entrance.

Homer shrugs but follows me.

Fifteen minutes later I am wearing racing togs and jogging out to the post on *Glue Factory*.

Gabface is standing next to his pony and when he sees us coming up to the starting post he nearly falls over.

"You—riding this race?" he gasps.

The hypo he is trying to slip his horse falls out of his hand.

"Winning this race," I grin. "By a nose."

"You're nuts," he yells.

"You'll see," I call back. "You can't stop Robert the Robot. We win by a nose."

"I will hold my nose," Gabface says. "But if I hold it until you limp past the finish line I will suffocate."

"Is that a promise?"

"Goodbye, Feep. And say goodbye to your money, too," he calls after me.

I bend down and pat *Glue Factory* on the neck as we get ready to run. She is in good form, but I am heavy. And I am depending on just one thing to win.

But my worries dissolve in a cloud of dust.

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We're off. Way, way off!

I keep watching Gabface's horse—*Cut Plug*. He comes up strong. I give my nag the old pressure. We are neck and neck. We pull away from the rest. We round the turn. The crowd is busting lungs all over the place.

We head for home. I bend over in the saddle. *Cut Plug* is even with me. I see the finish line ahead. We are neck and neck. And then I give one last boot. *Glue Factory* jerks her head out. We cross the finish line.

We win—by a nose!

And that, of course, is where I get all my money.

LEFTY FEEP sat back and relighted his cigar with a dollar bill.

"Some story," he commented.

"Some hooey," I said.

"Who's hooey?"

"You," I answered. "To begin with, what did those scientists say when you told them their robot was ruined?"

"Nothing. They will build another one anyway. Right now they are all mixed up building a rocket ship, and they do not even pay attention when I report to them. No trouble there at all."

"All right," I sighed. "But there is one other thing wrong with this story of yours. How did you manage to win this race? You're heavier than the average jockey. Even if your horse was in good form, I don't see how you could win by a nose, as you say."

"Well," Feep admitted, "I really don't win."

"Aha, I thought so!"

"Robert the Robot wins the race, like I tell Gabface."

"But Robert the Robot was torn to pieces."

"I know. But he still wins by a nose."

"How?"

"It's this way," said Lefty Peep. "My horse is almost as fast as Gabface's this day. In fact, without doping his nag, the two horses will run about even, I figure. So I can ride as jockey and come in neck and neck."

"But you won by a nose."

"That is where Robert the Robot really wins," Feep grinned. "You see, when he is busted, I merely take some of the plastic wood from Robert the Robot's body and—"

"And what?"

"And I mould an extra long nose to glue on the horse!"

WHOLES IN ONE

Just what do we mean when we refer to a "whole"?

MANY scientists had often wondered whether in learning we respond to specific objects about us or to the *relations* between them. A few interesting experiments performed with various animals threw some light on this problem of "wholes."

One scientist trained two hens (which are generally notorious for their lack of intelligence) to expect food from the dark only of two papers glued side by side on a wooden board. Each hen was placed in a wire coop so that it could stick out its head to peck grain from the wooden board placed next to the coop. The grain was scattered in equal amounts upon both the dark and light papers. If the hen pecked at the grain placed on the darker paper, it was allowed to eat; if it pecked at the light paper, it was shooed away. After about 500 trials, with many interchanges of the two papers (so that there would be no association between right side and dark paper or left side and light paper), the hen pecked regularly at the darker paper. This stage of its training, then, established the dark paper over the light paper as that giving grain.

The next step in the experiment would answer whether the hen picks a specific piece of paper or whether it responds to a relationship. So the experimenter substituted for the light paper one that was even darker than the first dark one used. Would the hen respond to the brightness relation-

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ship—or would it stick to its "Old Faithful" piece of paper? The hens used immediately responded to the *relationship*. In 70 per cent of the trials, the new piece of paper drew the pecks.

Even so stupid a creature as a hen, the scientist concluded, will respond to the *relation* "darker than" rather than to the specific stimulus which it had ben carefully trained to select.

Another, and similar experiment, was performed with a three-year-old child. The child was taught to pick the brighter of two boxes as the one containing candy. And, again, a still brighter box was presented with the one the child was taught to respond to previously. The experimenter reports that the child invariably chose the new bright box, instead of the former one which held the cherished reward. This, and several other like experiments performed with humans, has drawn scientists to the conclusion that human beings react toward situations as *related wholes,* not to bits or portions of the environment.

Probably the most interesting and amusing experiments performed relating to this question of relationships were those by Wolfgang Kohler upon a small island a short distance off the African coast. Here, with a colony of chimpanzees, this scientist carried on his work under the most natural conditions—all experimental situations closely paralleled the animals native habitat.

The first in his series of experiments was performed with a chimpanzee who was not fed for several days. A bunch of bananas was tied to the roof of his cage, then a box was casually thrown upon the floor in a corner some distance away. The ape did the obvious thing, at first. He jumped for the bananas, tried to climb the walls, and did other disorganizing activities. The box was ignored. After many hours of this unsuccessful effort, the ape was given a clue. The experimenter dragged the box over beneath the suspended fruit, stepped on it, and touched the food. After he got down, he threw the box in a corner again. Immediately, the chimpanzee pulled the box over under the fruit, climbed upon it, and pulled down the food. The ape had "seen the connection."

A variation of this experiment was tried upon an ape considered stupid by the scientists. This animal had seen the others pull the box over and use it, but he had never done the trick himself. One day, Kohler placed this ape into the cage with the suspended bananas and the box. The result was hilarious. This chimpanzee at once ran to the box, but instead of dragging it under the fruit, he either climbed upon it and jumped up, or else climbed up upon the box, hopped down, and quickly ran over to jump up from the ground under the fruit! Such behavior clearly illustrates the hopelessness of solving even a simple problem when the relations involved are not readily understood.

In comparison with this almost ridiculous activity is the experiment with Sultan, Kohler's most intelligent chimpanzee. The problem was to see whether Sultan could combine two sticks to make a very useful food-getting implement. The sticks were two hollow bamboo rods, one being of smaller diameter than the other so that it could be fitted easily into the end of the larger to form a single long stick. (The pattern of activity of pulling in bananas and other fruit by using single sticks was frequently seen. None of the animals, however, was ever given the task before of joining two sticks into one and using the resulting long stick as a tool with which to pull in fruit between the bars of the cage.)

The chimpanzee was put into the cage where the two sticks were. Just outside, and too far away to be reached by either stick alone, were the several pieces of fruit. Sultan's first actions, in spite of the apparent simplicity of this set-up, were incredibly wasteful (as seen through human eyes). He tried to reach the food with one stick; then he tried the other. These failing, he first pushed one stick out as far as possible; then, with the second stick, he pushed the first one on until it finally touched the fruit. This physical contact, it was noted, seemed to give Sultan a great amount of satisfaction—even though the food was still out of his reach!

Even after the experimenter gave Sultan a clue by sticking one finger into the opening of the larger stick (directly in front of the ape), the problem seemed no nearer solution than before. After an hour more of futile effort, the ape apparently lost interest and gave up the task as hopeless.

But Sultan continued to play with the two sticks, casually experimenting with new positions. After some manipulation, holding one stick in the left hand and the other in the right, he accidently got them together! This seemed to follow a short period of "brooding" and sullen inactivity. The chance solution seemed to come as a flash of "insight"—it almost seemed, in human terms, to have suddenly "dawned upon him."

These first connections were loose. The sticks frequently fell apart and there was a disorganizing confusion. But, as the animal persisted, the new stick evolved into a useful tool, until, with great eagerness, Sultan not only pulled in all of the fruit, but also all other small movable objects, such as sticks and stones, within easy reach. And on the following day, after only a little wasted time, Sultan quickly joined the two sticks and got the fruit.

This, probably the greatest experiment in the field of *related wholes,* clearly illustrates, as did the others, that as long as the elements in a given situation appear unconnected, no total picture or complete understanding can develop. When the total pattern was seen, Sultan got his food.

Thus, these simple experiments with simpler creatures than Man show that the inventor can shriek "Eureka!" only after the "total, meaningful picture" has made its appearance.

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DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS

By HAROLD LAWLOR

Only the good die young, complained the ladies of hell. So Satan made changes!

I said, "Who cares where it leads as long as she does the leading?"

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I KNOW, I know. You'll think I'm nuts. Many's the time I've said, jokingly, "I've been to hell and back." But this time I've really *been* to hell and back!

One thing about feature writers—we meet such interesting people. But I certainly never thought I'd rub elbows with Satan himself while pursuing my profession. Not to mention those others—

But I'd better begin at the beginning. . . .

LIGHTNING forked the sky, thunder rumbled intermittently, rain slashed against the windows as I guided my convertible over the deserted road. While I peered more or less anxiously through the dark fan made by the windshield wiper, Ronnie Erskine sat beside me sullenly.

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Ronnie Erskine was probably the handsomest guy in the world. Tall, dark, and handsome—as the wrens have it. But when it came to brains and enthusiasm, I was discovering he left much to be desired.

"Mr. Mitchell—" he began.

"Call me Bill," I offered generously.

"Well, then, Bill, you better explain," he whined for the umpteenth time since we left Chicago. "You better tell me where we're going."

"All right," I snarled. The guy was driving me nuts. The reason I hadn't told him was because I thought he'd be scared. But he couldn't walk back now, so I let him have it. "It's like this. . . . In the last year, six guys have come to this Inn of the Laughing Cat we're heading for, and they've never returned. Just disappeared into thin air."

Ronnie's handsome pan turned toward me with a jerk like Charley McCarthy's. "Well, and so? . . . Wasn't any search made for them?"

"Sure. But nothing could be found of them. Nor could any information be gotten out of Madame Callot, who runs the joint. She admitted they came. She said they left. And no one could prove she was lying."

"Go on," Ronnie nudged.

"Well," I said, "my editor told me to high-tail it out here and sniff around and see what I could learn. So here I am."

"Yes, but what's this got to do with me?" Ronnie asked. "Why bring me along?"

"Because here's the joker. These six lads who disappeared were all *young and handsome*. Now I'm young, but I'm certainly no beauty. Though I've got my points," I added parenthetically. "Well, so I figured if I'm going to case this joint, it'd be easier if I brought a handsome friend along. I thought of you—playing in stock in Chicago, slaying every girl who looked at you, if I could believe the papers. So you're gonna be the decoy, see?"

RONNIE stared out at the windswept blackness, and shivered. His handsome head wig-wagged back and forth.

"Nh, nh," he said. "Get another guinea pig."

In the light from the dashboard I could see his lower lip sticking out. I ached to put it back in place—with my fist—but I humored him.

"Aw, come on," I coaxed. "Be a sport. 'Live dangerously' as the guy said."

"Nh, nh," Ronnie droned again.

My patience was at an end. I longed to plant a kick where it'd do the most good. "You're going to do it whether you like it or not," I snarled. "Or else—"

I broke off. Some time before I'd swung the car off the main highway. We'd jolted and bounced along a rough track. Now I saw a low, sprawling, dark huddle that was a building, and my spotlight picked out a madly swinging sign upon which was painted a laughing cat.

I grinned, my good humor restored.

"You might as well stop belly-aching," I told Ronnie. "Here we are."

I PARKED the car under a porte-cochere and we entered the vast hall of the Inn of the Laughing Cat. Or rather, I entered. Ronnie had to be dragged in.

The place was so crowded with furniture that it was a minute before I saw the woman standing behind the hotel counter.

She was tall and skinny, and sported dyed black hair and a slight mustache. Long earrings glittered in her ears. Sitting on her bony shoulder was a mon-

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key, its tail curled around her scrawny throat. There was a strong aroma of gin in the air.

"You must be Madame Callot," I said. I decided a little of my devastating charm could do no harm. I stammered, "But so young . . . so beautiful . . . I hadn't realized . . ."

Madame preened, and arched her skinny neck. She tossed me a lovely smile filled with gold teeth. With a withered, gem-laden hand she toyed with her back hair.

"La, la!" she said, and winked.

"La, la!" I said, not to be outdone.

"Nh, nh!" Ronnie said, tugging at my sleeve.

"Shut up!" I hissed, and turned once more to Madame. "I'm Bill Mitchell, and this is my friend, Ronnie Erskine. We want a room for the night."

Madame peered near-sightedly at Ronnie. Then she smiled. She stuck out a claw and stroked his arm. "He's very handsome, your friend," she said to me. "La, la!"

"La, la!" I grunted sourly. "Look —about that room—"

Madame reeled to one end of the counter, the monkey chattering and making faces at us all the while, and came back with a key.

"For you gentlemen," she said with solemn, drunken dignity, "the Red Room. Sleep soundly . . . but not," she giggled, "*too* soundly!"

I felt a chill gallop up my spine. Ronnie was dragging at my sleeve again.

"Let's go away from here," he whimpered.

"Shut up dope!" I cracked his rib smartly with my elbow. I must have knocked the breath out of him, for he said no more as we followed Madame's bony back through the vast, dark reaches of the rear of the Inn.

At the door of our room she left us. But not before she'd patted Ronnie's shrinking cheek, and said once more, "La, la!" in her cracked, old voice.

THE room we were in was as cluttered with furniture as the Inn's hall. Towering over all was a huge, four-poster bed, bearing aloft a canopy of red damask, thick with dust and giving off a strong, musty odor. I peered around in the semi-darkness.

But it was Ronnie who discovered the *pièce de résistance.*

"Look!" he said, and grabbed as usual at my arm.

"Now what—" I snapped.

He was pointing to a huge oil painting about eight feet square that decorated one wall. We moseyed over for a gander.

It was a picture of a blonde, none too warmly dressed. In fact she had no clothes on at all. Ronnie and I goggled. The babe was a knockout, what I mean, with more curves than a mountain highway. She was portrayed standing sideways, her right hand on the knob of a door, her left hand holding a lantern. In her half-veiled eyes and thin, mysterious smile there was an invitation.

"She seems to have something on her mind," Ronnie said thoughtfully.

"I can guess," I grinned. "Boy, wherever she'd lead, I'd follow."

This feeble crack of mine, it developed later, was funnier than I knew.

Ronnie was feeling brighter. It was the bed that had chirked him up. I was to learn that the guy was always sleepy. We hit the hay about eleven p.m. Ronnie's snores began almost immediately, and not much later I fell asleep myself.

I AWAKENED with a start. The luminous hands on my watch dial pointed to two o'clock. I sat up, and

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in the darkness heard Ronnie struggling up, too. Thunder rolled deafeningly, but it wasn't that I'd heard.

"What is it?" Ronnie whispered, clutching at my arm.

"I don't know. I heard something, but what—"

I broke off. We strained our ears, tried to penetrate the blackness with hot, staring eyeballs. I saw it first.

"Look!" I pointed. My scalp prickled as if my hair were trying to stand on end.

The lantern that the girl in the picture was holding began to glow with golden light! Dimly at first, then brighter, until we could see the girl's luscious red lips parted in a wide smile.

"Yoo-hoo, boys!" she called, and beckoned. "Come on!"

"What the hell!" I said, startled. But only for a minute. Thinking fast, I shoved Ronnie out of bed, clambered out myself. "Come on!" I hollered.

Ronnie hooked an arm around one of the bedposts. *"Nh, nh,"* he said. His teeth were clicking like a tap-dancer's heels.

I gave him a yank that nearly snapped his neck, and hauled him over to the painting. The blonde stretched out a hand. Dazedly I put one of mine in hers. With the other, I kept a tight grip on the shrinking Ronnie.

"Oops-a-daisy!" giggled the blonde, and yanked.

We stepped right through the canvas of the painting. The girl opened the door in the picture, and we all passed through. We were in a rocky tunnel, its rock ceiling dripping moisture on our unprotected heads and pajama-ed bodies. I think I must have been half-asleep till now, but the chill revived me.

"What's your name?" I said to our lovely guide, just to open the conversation. But she wouldn't talk.

"Ssssh!" she whispered. "My name doesn't matter. I have to leave you soon."

"Aw, heck," I said. Fully recovered, I was beginning to enjoy this. "Why?"

"Because I'm Keeper of the Back Entry, that's why." She hurried on, and Ronnie and I winced as the rock floor nipped at our bare feet. "If I didn't constantly stand guard, mind you, there's no telling what kind of jerks would try to sneak in."

"In?" I questioned. "In where? What is this place?"

The blonde stopped, and stared at me appalled. "Why, didn't you know? This is Hell."

"I'll say it is," Ronnie moaned.

"You misunderstand," our guide said, looking at him contemptuously. "This is *really* Hell."

I said, dazed, "Well, I cer'nly get around!" I shivered in my thin pajamas, and looked about. "This tunnel is cold."

OUR guide seemed not to notice this, despite her complete lack of attire. "Don't worry," she said cryptically, "you'll soon be warm. Too warm."

I decided I didn't like her tone.

She led us another thousand feet or so, then stopped. "I must go back now. You two just keep on walking."

She pointed down the tunnel to where a pinkish-red glow lighted the far end.

"I want to go home," Ronnie said firmly.

The blonde gave him a shove. Me, too. "You can't go home."

"We could go back with you," Ronnie argued, "through the painting."

"Oh, no, you couldn't," our guide laughed. "You can come in, but there's no getting out. It's impossible." She gave us another little shove, and ended the conversation by turning and walking rapidly away.

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Ronnie and I watched the golden glow of the lantern gradually fade until it was no more than a pinpoint of light. I looked the other way down the tunnel toward the sinister red glow. I shivered again. Ronnie was shaking like a cooch dancer.

"It's colder," Ronnie complained.

"Why not?" I said. "With the hot momma gone?"

Heh, heh.

"You're a card," Ronnie said bitterly.

"Well, anyway, come on," I said. "We can't stand here and freeze."

Reluctantly he let me lead him. We stumbled along on our aching feet in the darkness for what seemed miles. Gradually the tunnel grew lighter. At last we emerged through an opening, and found ourselves on a rock balcony, overlooking a cavern of such immense proportions that it was immeasurable. I tore my eyes from a solid wall of leaping flames, and looked at the man waiting to receive us.

"Welcome, gentlemen, welcome!" he cried—a shade too heartily, I thought.

Like Ronnie, he was tall and dark. His curly black hair curled upward in front in the form of horns. He was attired in faultless evening clothes.

"Look!" Ronnie clutched my arm again, and pointed.

Back of the man, a long, arrow-tipped tail was lashing slowly, in a contented sort of way.

He followed the direction of our gaze. "Oh, my tail?" he said. "It always amuses newcomers. Watch!"

Under our fascinated gaze, the tail whipped around, extracted a silver cigarette case from the man's pocket, held it out in a gesture of invitation.

"See?" the man said. "Handy, too. But permit me to introduce myself. I'm Satan—sometimes known as Lucifer, or Beelzebub."

"Oh, oh!" Ronnie said, getting behind me.

Somewhat at a loss, I began feebly, "I'm Bill—"

"Oh, I know who you both are," Satan interrupted. He frowned darkly. "But what is this?" He looked from Ronnie to me accusingly. "I told Madame Callot, *handsome* young men. Ronnie is fine, but you—"

He threw up his hands.

"I may not be good-looking—" I began, somewhat testily, but he cut me off.

"You're probably wondering why you're here at all," he interjected suavely. "Let me explain. You've heard the expression, 'Only the good die young'? Just so. While not true of women, it *is* true of men. With what result, gentlemen? Why, Hell contains only *old* men."

RONNIE and I listened in puzzlement.

"Alas!" Satan looked unhappy. "This state of affairs is not at all to the liking of our women inhabitants. For some years they've been ding-donging at me about it till I thought I'd go mad. You know how women are? Every time I'd meet Eve, for instance, she'd sneer, 'What we need around here is a lot of new blood.' There were others equally importunate. They raised—well, hell, if you'll excuse the pun."

I was immensely interested. "Go on," I urged. "What did you do about it?"

Satan smiled diabolically. "Last year, through the good offices of Madame Callot, I began to import new, *young* men. There was peace for awhile. But unfortunately," he sighed, "not many young men come to the Inn of the Laughing Cat. So a few of our oldest women inhabitants are still with-

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out consorts. They've given me no peace. But," he brightened, "they'll be crazy about Ronnie. Too bad there's only one of him. I'm afraid they'll tear him apart."

Ronnie bleated, and cringed against me.

"But," Satan frowned, and looked at me. "You—"

Here it was again. Hinting I looked like a gorilla. Before I could make the sharp answer on the tip of my tongue, there was another interruption.

High heels clicked up the stairway to our right. In amazement I stared as Satan hollered petulantly, "Go 'way, go 'way, go 'way! If you're going to start something again—"

The man actually seemed to fear the pocket-sized Venus who came up the stairs. She had gilded red hair and a perfect figure, tastily clad in a short tunic of thin asbestos. Her big brown eyes gave Satan a hurt look. Her red lip trembled.

"All right for you, Lucy!" she said.

"Don't call me Lucy! It's Lucifer!"

She was turning away dejectedly when her eyes fell on us and brightened.

"Hello, kids," she said huskily.

I looked at Satan. "Give us a knock-down," I suggested.

RELUCTANTLY he introduced us all around. This girl, it seemed, was a recent arrival, name of Maribel Lee. On Earth, she'd been a strip-tease dancer, and a good one too, I'll bet, or I'm no judge.

Funny, we clicked right from the first moment.

Ronnie set it off. He backed away and glared at Maribel. "Keep away!" he warned her.

Puzzled, she looked at Satan. "Is the guy nuts?" she asked. "Who wants to get near him?" She looked at me. "But this one, now—"

Satan gasped, "You mean you actually *prefer* Bill?"

"Certainly!" Maribel said, somewhat stiffly. She stepped back and looked at me as if I were a painting and her judgment had been questioned. "Look at those shoulders! Look at those hips!—I mean, he hasn't any, if you get what I mean, which is all to the good."

I could feel myself positively blossoming in the warmth of her admiration. High time someone looked at me without swooning. I tossed a smug look at the thoughtful Satan.

"Besides, he's probably got brains," Maribel concluded. "I saw him first. He's mine. I'd like to see anybody get him away."

Well!

Next thing I knew, Satan was handing Ronnie and me each a pair of asbestos shorts. "Put these on," he directed.

I peeled off my pajama coat, but Ronnie glared at Maribel who was looking on with interest.

"Turn your back!" Ronnie told her sternly.

"Oh, *you!*" She made a face at him, but complied.

When we were dressed, I said, "Thanks. You can turn around now."

"Ah, ha!" Maribel wagged a finger gaily. "I peeked, once!"

Ronnie blushed a fiery red.

"I wasn't looking at you," Maribel said to him coldly.

"Here, here!" Satan said. "Come, now. I'll take Ronnie to the Palace. You, Maribel, follow along with Bill."

WHEN the others had gone ahead, Maribel and I went slowly down the steps jutting out from the wall of rock.

"How come you're here?" I asked. "You seem too nice a girl to be in Hell. Well, maybe not nice, exactly, but any-

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way *good*."

Her flashing smile rewarded me. She thrust an arm through mine. "It was like this," she said confidentially. "Back on Earth, a mobster, Tony Marocca, made violent passes at me, the lug. In a burst of girlish indignation, I shot him. But as he was dropping, *he* shot *me*. More excitement! Well, I was a murderess—"

"Technically, perhaps," I protested. "But the point could be argued. It was self-defense."

She smiled again. "You talk just grand!" She sighed. "But self-defense or not, they sent me here."

We reached the foot of the steps, and faced a solid wall of flame.

"Oops!" I said, and stopped.

But Maribel led me forward. "Don't be silly. It doesn't hurt a bit."

And it didn't. Terrifying as the leaping fires looked, it was like walking through red floodlights instead of actual flame. Once past the wall of fire I was able to see what the place was like.

We were in a huge valley, with a great arched dome of rock miles and miles above us. As far as the eye could see, houses stretched to the horizon. To the left, a black river wound its way—the Styx, Maribel said. Over all was a crimson haze.

We walked through the bustling streets, through the hordes of imps and people all intent on their own business. They didn't give us even a passing glance.

In the living room of the Imperial Palace, we found Ronnie stretched out on a sofa asleep. Satan rose from the desk at which he'd been sitting, and pressed a bell.

Seconds later an imp wearing a Western Union cap came in and Satan handed him three notes. "Deliver these at once."

The imp's tail saluted smartly. "Yes, your Imperial Majesty!"

"Where'd he get the cap?" I asked idly.

"From a messenger who arrived this morning," Satan answered. "Back on Earth, the kid sang 'Happy birthday to you' just once too often."

"And to the wrong party, evidently," Maribel giggled.

WE HADN'T long to wait. An imp in formal livery had no sooner served us with cocktails, when there was a pretty babble of feminine voices from the hall. With a flutter of draperies and many high-pitched cries, three women tripped in.

"Where are they? . . . Where?" they cried in chorus. "You said two! . . . Oh, Satan darling, we can hardly wait! . . . Hurry!"

In the confusion Ronnie wakened, and was off the sofa like a startled fawn. He cowered against the wall. As for me, I was too stunned to do anything but stand there. The room seemed to be filled with screaming women.

"Girls, girls, girls!" Satan was saying helplessly.

"For Pete's sake, who are they?" I whispered to Maribel. "Can only three women make that much noise?"

Before she could answer, two of the women spotted Ronnie and fell on him with piercing cries. Oddly enough, the third one saw me, where I was standing with Maribel. After a moment of indecision she sauntered over gracefully. She was rather short, with long, slanted dark eyes and a general air of knowing what was what.

"Hello, Maribel," she said. "Who's the boy friend?"

Sulkily Maribel introduced us. "The Queen of Sheba. Bill Mitchell.

My eyes were popping. "Not really?" I stammered inadequately.

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"I've heard of you."

"No doubt," the Queen admitted graciously. "My visit to Solomon—well-publicized, you know. And the old boy gave me quite a build-up himself."

I was too groggy to make any brilliant small talk. "You're looking well," I said feebly.

"Considering her age, you mean," Maribel whispered hoarsely. She was a little jealous, I guess.

Sheba's lovely face hardened. "Be careful, Maribel! I'm a personage in Hell, don't forget. Seniority rights, you know." She turned to me. "You know, you're not so bad—once the first shock is over, I mean. How about you and I—"

But the Queen's open wooing was too much for Maribel. I felt her arm slip through mine possessively. Her brown eyes were glinting sparks at the Queen.

"Make another pass at this guy," Maribel hissed, "and I personally will take you apart!"

The Queen drew back, baffled and a little alarmed.

"Vulgarian!" she sniffed.

"I am not either a vulgarian," Maribel denied hotly. "I'm Spanish, 'way back."

The Queen must have decided I wasn't worth fighting over.

"So okay," she shrugged. "So all right the guy is yours." She turned away, but called back over her shoulder, "And no bargain, either."

"Oooh!" Maribel lunged after her retreating figure, but I grabbed the hot-tempered little honey just in time.

"Let it go. After all," I said modestly, "I'll admit maybe my appeal ain't exactly universal."

Maribel subsided with an angry shake of her small body. "Some day I'm gonna mix it with that dame." She glared at Sheba's back, and added with loud malice, "Awful hips, hasn't she?"

IN THE meantime, poor Ronnie was having his troubles with the other two, augmented now by the addition of the Queen to their numbers. Ronnie was pale as a sheet, fighting them off as best he could.

Satan was dancing about frantically, protesting, "Ladies, ladies, this will never do! Let's sit down calmly, and reason this thing out."

"Reason nothing!" snapped the one in the golden headdress. "I saw him first."

"Who's she?" I asked.

"Cleopatra," Maribel answered.

One look at Cleo, and I didn't blame Marc Anthony a bit. An outstanding number anywhere.

"And the other?" I indicated the tall, shapely girl with the slightly hooked nose who was clutching doggedly at Ronnie's right arm.

"Salome." Maribel sounded rather glum. She was watching me narrowly.

"I just wanted to know their names," I explained hastily.

"Uh-huh." There was a shade of suspicion in her tone.

Ronnie's dark hair was rumpled, his breath coming in panting gasps. I decided it was time to put a stop to this.

"Hold everything!" I shouted.

Only Satan heeded me. Cleo, Salome, and Sheba were too intent on their prey.

"I think I know a way," I yelled above the din, "in which you can settle this to the satisfaction of all."

Satan mopped his wet brow. "You're a life saver! Hurry, man, out with it!"

"What do I get out of it?" I bargained cunningly.

"Anything, anything!" the distraught Satan said. "Hurry, man, before they team this dump off its foundations!"

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"I want the six young men you abducted, here at five o'clock."

"Yes, yes!" Satan agreed hastily, one eye on the vociferous women. "The plan?"

"Suppose we all meet here at five," I said. "Suppose each of the girls, then, does the thing for which she's noted. Then let Ronnie decide for himself—"

Squeals of delight cut through my words. Evidently they'd heard me even in their preoccupation with Ronnie.

"Splendid! I'll take him for a ride on my barge!" Cleopatra said, and added archly, "Sailor, beware!"

Ronnie tugged at his collar and jumped when the Queen of Sheba clapped her hands gaily. "And I'll bring him presents—like I did to Solomon."

But it was really Salome's ball. "And I," she said portentously, "will do for Ronnie the Dance of the Seven Veils!"

Hotcha!

WELL, we could hardly wait. Though I have to admit that Ronnie still looked none too happy.

I tried to cheer him up. "Just think, the Dance of the Seven Veils! Boy, don't you want to see it?"

"Nh, nh." Ronnie was definite. "I want to go home."

Well, that was too much. I was ready to wash my hands of the drip. But Maribel had a really kind heart. She went to Ronnie.

"Aren't you just a *teentsy* bit tired?" she cooed. "A little shut-eye and you'll feel better—now, won't you?"

Ronnie turned to sympathy as a flower to the sun. "Now that you remind me, I am, and I would."

Satan clapped his hands briskly. "The very thing! Suppose, Maribel, you take him home and put him to bed. A capital idea, capital!"

Well, I didn't think it was so hot.

"I'm going, too!" I said jealously.

At which Maribel smiled smugly.

ONCE ensconced in the golden swan bed in Maribel's bedroom, Ronnie fell asleep immediately.

"All in, poor boy!" Maribel said, looking down at him.

"You needn't sound so damned tender!" I snapped.

She giggled. "I'll teach you to ogle those three old hags."

In her living room, we sank into a sofa.

"Tell me," Maribel said, "what you're going to do. You had something in mind when you asked Satan to have those six other fellows there at five o'clock."

"No, I didn't. I wish I did." I ran a distracted hand through my hair. "This is a terrible mess. Poor Ronnie, too. He trusted me. I've got to get them all out of Hell somehow."

"Okay," Maribel agreed. "Get me out, too, while you're at it. But how?"

That was just it. How? I thought deeply for a time, and at last I said slowly, "I think I have a plan that will work."

Rapidly I outlined it to Maribel.

"It might do—" she began dubiously.

"We've got to try!" I stood up. "I'll handle the Queen of Sheba."

"Like hell you will!" Maribel snapped. "I saw her look at you. You'll handle Cleopatra—*I'll* take care of the Queen."

I am nothing if not amiable. "So all right. Am *I* arguing?"

Maribel's eyes softened. Before I knew what she was about, she grabbed me and kissed me long and lingeringly.

Boy!

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I reeled out and trod on air over to Cleo's house.

Cleopatra lived in a vast mansion on the edge of the Styx. When I entered, she was having her toenails painted with henna by a Nubian slave.

"Ah, there!" she greeted me. "Want to go for a ride on my barge?"

"Some other time," I said hastily.

She wasn't offended. "What brings you here, then?"

I sat down. "Well, I was just wondering if you'd heard the remark that the Queen of Sheba passed about you."

"What!" Cleopatra turned to the slave. "Gombo, you may go!" When the slave was gone, Cleo fixed me with a dark eye. "All right, give!"

I gave. Smoothly I went into my little song and dance.

". . . I got it straight from Maribel," I finished plausibly.

Cleo paced the room like a bee-stung leopardess, swearing in all languages, including the Egyptian.

"My royal blood," she screamed, "is fit to be tied! That Sheba! That siren! Bah, that *busted* siren!" Her rage was truly regal. "Satan shall hear of this!"

Not giving me another glance, she rushed out.

I dusted my hands.

WITH the stage all set, we went to Satan's at five for the grand blow-off. Satan was nowhere in sight, but six young men were lined up in the ballroom. Somehow word had got around, and they looked on me as a liberator. Their premature gratitude made me nervous.

While we were chatting, more or less idly, Satan came rushing in. The poor guy was nearly out of his mind. His erstwhile careful attire was in sad disarray. On his cheeks were two red blotches.

"F'evven's sake!" Maribel exclaimed, all innocence. "What happened?"

"What a life!" Satan moaned. "The women!" Words began to spill from his lips. "I'm sitting down, taking it easy, see, when Cleopatra comes rushing in. She was in a terrible rage. She said she'd heard that the Queen of Sheba said, 'No wonder Cleopatra takes the men out on a barge. That's the only way she can keep 'em from running away.' Cleo was furious. She wanted me to boil the Queen in oil. When I refused, she slapped me. Look!" He pointed to his right cheek.

We all tsk'd sympathetically.

"As if that wasn't enough," Satan groaned, "after she'd gone, who comes tearing in but the Queen of Sheba. She was livid. She said she'd heard that Cleopatra said, 'Poor Sheba. Can't get to first-base with the men unless she gives 'em presents.' Sheba was in a towering rage. She wanted me to lash Cleo with scorpions. When I refused, she slapped me. Look!" He pointed to his left cheek.

We all tsk'd sympathetically again.

"They both claim," Satan finished, "that they're ashamed to face Ronnie now."

I winked at Maribel. Maribel winked at me.

Satan's face darkened. "Funny thing," he said. "Both of them said they'd heard these remarks in a roundabout way from Maribel." His eyes swiveled to the redhead at my side.

Maribel managed to look pretty innocent, but there's no telling where the thing would have ended. Luckily Salome came in just then, swathed in black chiffon veils.

"All right, boys, all set?" she said with the charming ease of the professional entertainer. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes glittered. Obvi-

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ously she intended to knock us into the aisles.

We all seated ourselves on the gilt recital chairs facing the dais. An orchestra of reedy pipes and drums struck up a tuneless melody. Salome began whirling and dropping veils at a great rate. In practically no time at all she was down to the last veil.

I may have been betraying a trifle more than polite interest. I may even have been leaning forward a little in my chair. For the next thing I knew Maribel's elbow drove sharply just under my lowest rib.

I GRUNTED, and turned to glare at her. Before my startled eyes, she seemed to be gripped in a sudden agony. She twitched. She writhed. She rolled her eyes. She waited till we were all staring at her in alarm.

"Phew!" she said loudly, then, and held her small nose. "Take it away! Phew! Is that ever corny, though!"

Her eyes were fixed directly on the performer.

Salome stopped abruptly, and advanced on Maribel, her lips drawn back from her teeth. The music wavered on a bar or two, then stopped.

"What was that last crack?" Salome demanded pleasantly. Her politeness didn't deceive us. We all waited for the explosion. The harassed Satan rose to his feet apprehensively.

"I said your dance was corny," Maribel repeated. "It, in a word, stinks."

Salome's face became dangerously congested, but Maribel went on airily, "If *that* gave Herod a thrill, my Red Garter number back on Earth would have sent him into convulsions!"

There was a long moment of awful silence. Slowly Salome's glaring eyes went to the suddenly white face of Satan.

"You heard?" Salome demanded. "You heard her?"

Satan gulped. Salome's foot tapped impatiently.

"Well! What are you going to do about it? Are you going to stand there and let her insult me?"

"Now, darling—" Satan began. It was only too evident he wasn't going to do a thing. Salome was no fool.

"Don't you 'darling' me!" She hauled off and slapped him right and left, the slaps starting from her knees. Satan reeled under the impact. Salome rushed out, screaming hysterically.

"And that," Maribel said, "would be that."

Unfortunately she spoke too loud. Satan heard her.

"You!" he said.

Back of my hand, I whispered, "I think he smells a rat!"

"Don't be silly," Maribel gurgled. "Who'd *want* to smell a rat?"

Satan struggled for self-control. His burning glance on Maribel was awful.

"You're back of all this! The other, too!" Froth appeared at the corners of his mouth. "I'll sentence you to the pits for the next two thousand years! I'll roast you on the gridirons! I'll dip you in wax, and use you for a candle! I'll—"

Maribel didn't quail, though the rest of us did. Slowly she walked over and stood in front of Satan.

"Is a great big nasty cross old poohbah!" she cooed.

Flesh and blood could stand no more. And Satan wasn't even flesh and blood.

"Get out!" he bellowed with a mighty oath. "I can't stand any more! You've been a trouble-maker ever since you arrived. You've made a regular hell out of Hell. Go on, get out! Get back to Earth—and take all these guys with you!"

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With that he lifted his arms, and made mysterious passes with his hands.

The next thing we knew we were back on Earth.

WELL, that's about all. The other six fellows went back to their homes. The Inn of the Laughing Cat burned down shortly after Madame Callot ran away with an organ-grinder —la, la! (He probably wanted the monkey.) Ronnie, the last I heard, had joined a Tibetan monastery. And Maribel—

We've been married three years now. And Maribel hasn't changed a bit, if you know what I mean. Indeed there are times when I look back on Hell rather longingly.

After all, I think wistfully, it wasn't so bad.

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

(Continued from page 7)

THAT ingenious gentleman, Benjamin Franklin, was the inventor of the type of eyeglasses known as bifocals. Annoyed at having to carry two pairs of glasses, he split a pair in half and gave each eye two different lenses. As he explained, "I only have to move my eyes up and down as I want to see distinctly far or near." His invention was slow to take hold because an ordinary pair of spectacles in his time cost about $100 each. For Franklin, the champion of thrift, it was a case of killing two birds with one stone.

THERE are mermaids, but they are not beautiful blonds. This fact may disillusion many people but the truth is what we want. The mermaid which has been found is really a sea cow who is physically unattractive being fat and huge. The upper portion of her body resembles that of a human head—the lower portion consisting of a flat forked tail.

Also—various seals, which have intelligent, human appearances upon their faces, lift the upper portion of their bodies out of the water in a manner characteristic of a human being, who is shrugging his shoulders. Female seals clasp their young to their bosoms in a very human manner. From sights such as these sailors have concocted the stories about mermaids.

ALL-SYNTHETIC tires for passenger cars have been manufactured and are now giving highly satisfactory performance in all types of driving service—such is the decision of A. C. Kelly of the B. F. Goodrich Company.

After inspecting the Akron (Ohio) factories of the rubber company for a week, his conclusion is:

"The manufacture of large-size truck and bus tires of synthetic rubber presents some difficult problems. However, the tire engineers are now hard at work and are confident that these problems can be solved as more experience is gained."

IT takes a pretty startling discovery to jolt a body of men like the Electro-Chemical Society of Chicago for they see many wonderful inventions being developed daily. But even this society was amazed when Dr. Charles F. Burgess, formerly a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Wisconsin, demonstrated his process of cutting a hole in steel using only a small stream of salt water as his cutting tool. Dr. Burgess claims that he can drill through metals as hard as tungsten carbide which today can only be cut with a diamond.

The principle involved in this process is similar to that used in commercial electroplating processes only in this case the metal removed from one plate is not coated onto another one but is carried away. A wire sealed into the glass nozzle is connected to the negative pole of a battery and the plate to be drilled is connected to the positive pole. When the stream of salt water flows, a closed circuit is made between the two poles of the battery since the salt water is a good electrical conductor. The electrical current which flows through the closed circuit removes metal from the plate which is then washed away by the stream of water. In this manner a hole is cut through the metal plate.

IF we plant a garden of four-o'clocks, poppies, dandelions, and several other types of flowers, we can easily know the approximate time of day. Flowers have an amazingly accurate way of opening their petals to the sunshine and some to the absence of it. The mechanism is quite simple: when the concentration of sunlight reaches a certain point, the energy acquired is sufficient to enable the plant to open its petals.

Since the sun does have approximately the same concentrations each day, these plants open approximately the same time. By the use of the above mentioned flowers and others a clock can be constructed. For instance, the dandelion opens at four o'clock in the morning, the four o'clock at four in the afternoon, the poppies at five in the morning. Marigolds, pinks, ice plants, and morning glories would serve in such a scheme but

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many others could obviously be substituted.

IF you had your choice and were on the field of battle crouching in a shell hole, which would you rather face, artillery fire or aerial bombardment? Soldiers who have seen action in this war admit that they don't have their choice in the matter, but would rather undergo the demoralizing effect of the dive bombers than the devastating thunder of the artillery. The reason is that the big guns gradually get the range and when the shells land uncomfortably closer all the time, men begin to think each one has his name on it.

IN 1921, the United States government officials listed 42 strategic materials, vital to war, which had to be imported, either wholly or partially. Chemistry, metallurgy, and their related sciences, in this country, however, have not been dozing. Thanks to them, only 15 of the strategic materials are on the list now.

JAPAN can look forward to some earth shaking events in 1943—a plastering from the sky by United States bombers operating from advanced bases in Shangri-La, and a jarring up from below in a possible return engagement of the tremendous earthquakes that periodically visit it.

The last big temblor occurred in 1933 and before that Tokyo was laid low in 1923. Thus, by the law of averages, Tojo trembles lest the ground does in 1943.

MOST of us know of the hippopotamus because of its great weight and large appetite. We have heard that it can and does eat several bushels of raw fruit at a time. It is not so generally realized that this animal has many modifications which superbly adapt it for life in the water.

The hippopotamus is found in large swamps, small lakes and in rivers in Africa. Although a slow, ponderous ungainly animal on land, its stomach touching the ground, it can submerge at a moment's notice in water. It can remain with its entire body under the water for hours at a time. For doing this the hippopotamus has many unique features. To enable it to see without being seen its eyes are located in a position similar to the location of our ears. The nose is hooked upward so that the nostrils may project above the surface without the rest of the head showing. The most startling fact about the hippopotamus is that it has completely lost its hair except for some few bristles around its mouth. One very important feature of the hippopotamus is its ability to breathe very slowly and so on great dives it does not lose consciousness. With all these changes for life in and under water the hippopotamus has justly earned the title of the living submarine.

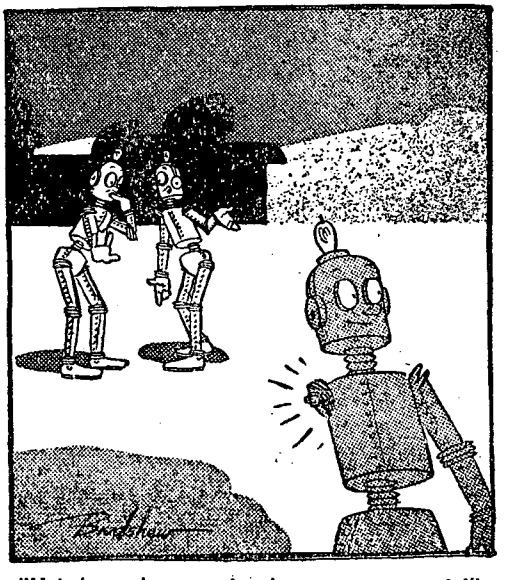
IT was on a bright sunny day in 1787 that a Frenchman named Andre Garnerin leaned out of the basket of a balloon and peered down 6,000 feet at the breathless and thrill-seeking crowd below. Then he jumped into space. His crude, experimental parachute didn't open immediately and the horrified onlookers gasped. Then, at 4,000 feet, air filled the chute and Garnerin floated the rest of the way down, landing safely amidst a cheering throng. Thus was completed the first successful planned parachute jump in history.

WE know that men have an average life expectancy of sixty to seventy years. The life expectancy of most animals is less, that of a few is greater. As an example, most insects live but a few hours or days. The common mosquito lives for almost two weeks while a form known as the ephemera lives but a day. Some beetles have been known to live almost thirty-seven years.

On the whole, crocodiles and alligators live the longest among the reptiles, their life expectancy being forty to one hundred years. The record for frogs and toads is thirty-six years, but the average is twelve to fifteen. Interestingly enough the sharks and salmon, some kinds, may live one hundred years while the herring lives twenty and the trout from five to ten.

Our horses live about thirty years, the rabbit somewhat more than five. The elephant may live up to one hundred years of age while the whales live to ninety. Yet who can compare these to the longevity of seemingly ancient trees which have seen three thousand years of life and still continue on!

ALL of which brings us to the end of the Notebook for this month. Coming next month is a special treat—our secretary posed for a cover—by McCauley! Maybe when you see this "Mac Girl" you'll drop into the office personally! *Rap.*



"He's been down to that loan company again!"

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The MERCHANT

"Come to me, my love!" she bellows at me. And boy, she really meant it!

This guy certainly had something to sell! Just pills, they seemed to be, but it was what they did that was terrific. Usually love is a grand thing, but the emotion these pills aroused—wow!

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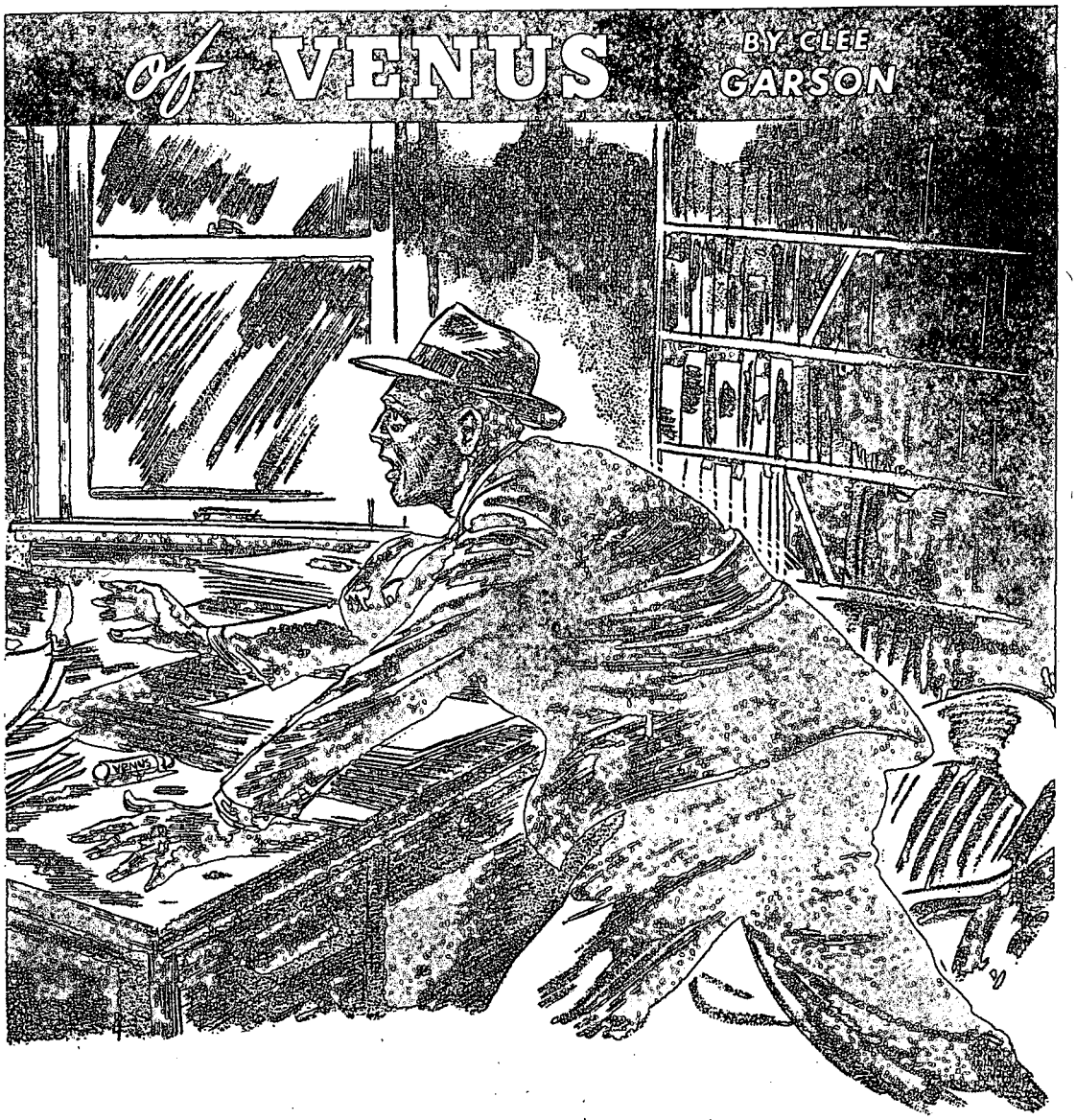
# of VENUS

BY CLEE GARSON



THIS guy came walking into my office and my life at four o'clock that afternoon. He wore a bowler hat, a celluloid collar and an air of timid respectability. He looked around the single room that comprised the quarters of the Atlas Advertising Agency until his glance found me sitting behind a typewriter on the only desk in the place.

He smiled faintly and nodded politely.

"Are you Mr. Boswell?" he inquired.

On the door, underneath the Atlas Advertising Agency slug I am listed as Stephen B. Boswell: President.

"Yes," I admitted. "I'm Boswell."

He gave me another faint smile and nodded again.

"I am Peter P. Paxton," he said, "and I am here on business."

He didn't look like a bill collector. They don't send people who look like Peter P. Paxton around to frighten

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debtors like Stephen B. Boswell. Maybe—just *maybe*—he was a client. I crossed my fingers.

"Advertising business?" I asked.

Peter P. Paxton nodded eagerly.

"You want me to place some advertising for you, Mr. Paxton?" I found the courage to ask.

He nodded. He seemed to nod to anything said in his direction.

"Yes, advertising business," he said.

I stood up and beamed, extending my hand and leaning toward him with a ghoulishly cordial grin.

"Pull up a chair, Mr. Paxton," I told him. "Pull up a chair!"

His handshake was like bread sopped in milk. He smiled again and nodded again, saw the chair beside the desk, pulled it around and sat down, plunking the brief case he carried onto his knees.

"Your, ah, work," he began. "Are you sure I wasn't interfering with—"

I looked down quickly at the sheet of paper that was still in the typewriter. It was the beginning of a nasty reply to a nasty creditor. I took it out quickly, hid it under a stack of papers and grinned again at Mr. Peter P. Paxton.

"Not at all," I said assuringly. "Just a little detail work on an account I'm handling."

Mr. Peter P. Paxton seemed relieved. He smiled and nodded. Then he opened his mouth and closed it quickly again. He didn't seem to know where to begin.

"Have you ever placed any advertising before, Mr. Paxton?" I asked. Obviously, he hadn't. Otherwise he wouldn't be coming to the Atlas Agency with his business.

"Ah, no. No, not exactly," he said, confirming what I'd guessed.

I smiled, trying not to look like a cat munching the last wing bone of a canary. I now had Mr. Peter P. Paxton placed in my personal category of clients. I had him in class number two. You see, class number one is comprised of fly-by-night business who want quack advertising placed for quick and generally illicit returns. No financially solvent agency will bother handling their accounts. I got a lot of them. Class two comprise the dumb-bells and the ginks who didn't know any better than to come to a jerk agency like mine with their business.

PETER P. PAXTON didn't look like the proprietor of a fly-by-night racket. He looked like a member of the dumb-bell group. Hence my classification of him.

"Then you aren't particularly well acquainted with the services a small, friendly, personally interested agency like Atlas can offer you, eh?" I asked.

"I know," said Mr. Paxton, saying the words as if he'd memorized them from a textbook, "that advertising means everything to the success of any business venture."

"That's good," I beamed. "Then I won't have to waste your time and mine proving what advertising can do for your business. Incidentally, Mr. Paxton, what is your business?"

"Potions," my client answered. "The Peter P. Paxton Potion Company."

I was surprised. I don't know why.

"Potions, eh? So you're a chemist? Or perhaps a drug firm?"

Mr. Paxton shook his head.

"Not exactly," he said. "Just, ah, plain potions. Potions to bring good luck. Potions to bring happiness. Potions to bring, ah, riches, and all that sort of thing."

I suddenly went bug-eyed. Not at his racket, but at the fact that I'd misjudged the guy so. He was a racketeer, a quackeroo of the first water, and I'd been so taken in by his appearance that I'd placed him in the respectable-

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but-dumb category!

"Potions, huh?" I repeated automatically, while my mental gears went rapidly into reverse on my opinion of the harmless-looking little guy.

"Pills, too," he put in. "Pills and Potions by Peter P. Paxton. I think that would make some sort of a slogan, don't you?"

"Oh," I said. "I see. Pills, too, eh?"

Mr. Paxton nodded. "Pills to bring good weather. Pills to perk you up. Pills to, ah, give you confidence, and all that sort of thing."

"Ummhum," I nodded. "I see. I see perfectly. But you say you never advertised before. How come?"

Mr. Paxton nodded. "I have not been in business long," he declared. "I, ah, have just lately been prompted to the conclusion that advertising would, ah, boom my products beyond my wildest dreams."

His business was his business. If he peddled the stuff from door to door previously, it was none of my concern. All that mattered to me was the fact that a small time quack wanted to branch out and reach his suckers through the printed word. That was my medium, and if he wanted to open an account—excellent.

"What sort of advertising do you figure on starting with, Mr. Paxton?" I asked. "I mean in financial layout, of course."

Mr. Peter P. Paxton seemed to have figured this out pretty well. At any rate his answer was quick enough.

"Oh, four or five thousand dollars worth in the first month or so," he said.

This *was* a surprise—and a pleasant one.

"Ah, yes. I see. I see you are a smart man, Mr. Paxton. You want to make a big, quick, clean—ah, boom in your product, eh?" I oozed.

Mr. Paxton beamed and nodded.

"Exactly Mr. Boswell. You see, I'd like to feature my latest potion-pill above all the others. I would like to focus, ah, all the attention on this latest pill. I have decided that an advertising campaign based around this latest potion-pill should put my entire business into a boom."

HE PICKED up his brief case from his knees and began to open it. I went into a cheery stream of chatter, thinking what a nice size of moola fifteen percent of four or five grand would be to the Atlas Advertising Agency and its practically penniless president.

"I think that's a top-notch idea," I said. "You see, Paxton, too many bandi—ah, business men in your type of rack—ah, enterprise, try too hard to sell all their products at once. They don't have brains enough to concentrate. Why, would you believe it, a client just the other day—" And I went into the mythical details of an imaginary argument with a nonexistent client who didn't have sense enough to do as Paxton wanted to do. But Paxton didn't seem to be paying much attention. He was digging around in his brief case.

"Ah," he exclaimed suddenly, pulling out a small glass vial and holding it up for me to see. "This is it!"

I looked at the vial. It had a cork stopper on the top, and contained four, round, candy-ish looking pills inside. Each was about half the size of a marble.

"Very nice," I said. "What goes?"

"This is my latest potion-pill, the Paxton product I would like to feature in the advertising scheme—" Paxton began.

"Oh. Sure. Sure, of course," I broke in. "That's fine. What are those potion-pills supposed to do?"

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My client colored like a schoolboy.

"They, ah, bring love, and all that sort of thing," he explained. He handed the vial to me.

"How nice," I grinned, glancing at the label that had been pasted on the vial. "And what a clever title you have for the potion."

"Casanova Capsules?" beamed Mr. Paxton eagerly. "You like that title?"

"Not bad," I admitted. "You could call it the Venus Vial of Casanova Capsules."

Mr. Paxton gurgled his glee at this suggestion.

"Wonderful, Mr. Boswell. Wonderful!"

"Thanks," I said. I put the vial down on the desk. "Now, if you're gonna feature this Venus Vial of Casanova Capsules, guaranteed to bring romance, what'll be the sales hook, I mean line, to go with it? I'd appreciate it if you'd outline a little more of what you want for your four or five grand worth of advertising."

"Certainly," Paxton nodded seriously. This latest potion-pill I have developed, is guaranteed to make the person who swallows it fall madly in love with the first person of the opposite sex he or she encounters. Of course, the purpose of the pill is to enable young men and women to win the love of their choice by administering the pill personally to the selected party. Then, said selected party, on unknowingly swallowing the pill, looks up to see the person who has administered it, promptly falling in love with that person."

I held up my hand.

"Wait a minute," I begged. "You mean that if I gave this pill to, say, a dame I was nuts about and wasn't getting anywhere with, she'd look up after swallowing the pill and be instantly in love with me?"

MR. Paxton beamed. "That is right."

I gave him a look of disgust.

"Too juvenile," I said. "Mumbo-jumbo is too heavy. Have to be pretty big suckers to stomach that sort of advertising hogwash. Why don't you just plan your sales line on some general talk about how the pills, if taken by the purchaser, will make said purchaser irresistible to members of the opposite sex?"

"But that would be reversing it," Mr. Paxton objected in a strangely shocked tone. "The pill does not work on the purchaser, for it is not to be consumed by the purchaser. It is to be *administered* by the purchaser to the person from whom he wants love. Don't you see?"

"Sure I see," I said, a trifle irritated. "I see the line you've worked out, all right. But I'm just giving you my professional advice on the matter. If you use my sales line in your ad copy, you'll sell a hell of a lot more pills. Customers won't go for that mumbo-jumbo as you have it now!"

"But my dear Mr. Boswell—" Paxton began.

I cut him off. "Do as you please," I shrugged irritatedly. "I'll work out a scheme on any line you desire. But I'm just giving you advice with my service, that's all. After all, it's your four or five thousand dollars that's going into this account, not mine."

"But if the purchaser were to take the pill himself, or, ah, herself," Paxton said, "it would *not* result in his or her becoming quite irresistible to the opposite sex. Don't you see?"

I looked at him in amazement.

"Of course I see. Do you think I'm nuts?"

Mr. Paxton colored. "What I mean is, if the purchaser of a Venus Vial were to take a Casanova Capsule, he or she

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would immediately fall in love with the first person encountered of the opposite sex." His voice took on a pleading note. "Therefore, I cannot see why you insist that I run the advertisement advising the purchaser to put the pills to such a potentially dangerous self-use."

I could only frown bewilderedly at the guy.

"Look," I said. "Maybe you know what you're saying, Paxton. But it doesn't make sense to me. You talk like the thing was a reality or something. But that's neither here nor there. You just tell me how you want the copy, and I'll write it anyway you say. I'm tired of trying to argue for your own good. After all, like I say, it's your four or five thousand bucks, and it's up to you to get what you want from it."

THE look that came suddenly into the eyes of Peter P. Paxton should have warned me. It should have, but it didn't. Maybe it didn't because what was to follow had never happened to me in all my days operating even the cheapest of agencies. At any rate, his next words spilled the beans and caused the sick shock that grabbed my stomach.

"Ah, that matter of four or five thousand dollars, Mr. Boswell," Paxton said apologetically, "is something I had better discuss with you now. Don't you think?"

Even then I didn't get it. I grinned.

"Sure. If you'd like to make a deposit before I swing into your account for you, that's certainly all right with me. Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Paxton shook his head anxiously.

"Ah, that isn't quite what I meant, ah, exactly, Mr. Boswell," he said. "I meant that I was hoping that your advertising agency could, ah, back my product by putting up the money for the first four or five thousand dollars worth of advertising. I'd pay you back with, ah, the profits from the campaign after the first month or so."

I could only gape at the guy in horrified astonishment.

"I'm sure that advertising would, ah, put my product over, Mr. Boswell. Then you wouldn't regret having backed me. No sir, you wouldn't. You'd profit handsomely, yes you would."

At last I found words. Many words. Hard words. Nasty words. Words that somehow escaped the attention of decent dictionaries. I let Mr. Peter P. Paxton have them all. If he had been a foot shorter and if I had been in better shape, I'd have let him have a fistful of knucks. And then I wound up wild and wrathful.

"Get out of here you cheap, nervy, lousy little grafter! Get out!"

But Peter P. Paxton was already halfway to the door, his face white and frightened. He got the idea.

"You are making a great mistake, Mr. Boswell," he said in shrill terror. "You are sending a great profit away from your door!"

I started across the office.

"Get!" I told him.

He got.

WHEN the door closed behind Paxton I unleashed any words I might missed in my first rash of rage. Then I lighted a cigarette and went gloomily back to my desk.

I sat there a while, thinking mad thoughts, then sad ones. I picked up the stall-off letter I'd been starting to one of my innumerable creditors and snarled at it. I rolled it up into a ball in my fist and threw it across the room.

Sickly, I thought of the quick mental spending I'd done of my fifteen per-

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cent of Paxton's advertising outlay. A few months back office rent, two weeks back room rent, a watch out of the pawn shop. Just a few little items on which I'd spent that nonexistent profit.

I looked at the cheap dollar watch I kept on my desk. Half the afternoon shot. Well, not exactly shot. That is, I didn't have anything to do except turn out a letter on a small account. I decided to have a little snort.

And then I saw the Venus Vial of Casanova Capsules. It was still on my desk. Pseudo-client Paxton had forgotten to take it along with him, since his exit had been so hasty.

I shrugged, picking it up. Pills, just pills. I tossed it back on the desk and got my hat . . .

AT ERIC'S bar, located right next to my office building, I was greeted with additionally cheering evidence of my status on Wall Street.

Nick, the day bartender, was polite but firm when I ordered a rye with a water wash.

"It'll have to be cash, Steve," he told me.

I glared at him.

"Since when is my credit here so lousy?" I demanded.

"Since this morning, when Eric was in," Nick said. Eric owned the joint. "He told me that we'd have to close off your credit until you made an effort to clear up a little of your back bar bill."

In my mental state at that moment I didn't even have the dignity to take my business elsewhere.

"I should depart in a huff," I said angrily.

"Sure," Nick grinned. "Sure you should, Steve."

I threw a half a dollar on the bar.

"But my feet are tired," I added. "Now give me that drink."

"Sure, Steve," Nick said cheerfully.

He brought the bottle, shot glass, and water over to me. I poured a rye, and he took the bottle away. I was too low even to resent the insulting implications of that gesture.

Babs Cartier came into the bar, then. Babs was a neat little blonde number who worked in the chorus at the *Gaiety* burlesque a block down the street. She had a form that had been made to be stared at. Her face was as pretty as a diamond, and as hard. She gave me a weary smile and took a seat next to me at the bar.

"How's the advertising big shot?" she asked.

"If you expect a drink," I said. "That type of gag won't get it. In fact, it wouldn't get it even if tight-fisted Eric hadn't cut off my credit as of this morning."

Bab *tsked* sympathetically.

"When you start paying cash for drinks, things must be low," she said.

"Sister," I said, "you're getting the idea."

Nick came over, and took Babs' order for a stinger. When he went away to mix it, Babs said: "Well, Stevie, you're looking at a little gal who is of today among the unemployed."

"Huh? You mean you've quit the *Gaiety?*" I demanded.

"Cold," Babs said. "I told George Slonski he could take his job and the measly forty bucks a week and—"

"Sure, sure," I said, cutting her off. "I get the picture. But what happened. Why the itch to become footloose from cash?"

Babs laughed, and it was not temple bells tinkling, if you know what I mean.

"Remember Terry Fortescue?" she asked.

I REMEMBERED Terry Fortescu. He was a heavy-sugared, wet nosed

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young playboy who had supported practically every swank night club in town single-handed for the last two years. I remembered, too, that Babs had mentioned several times of having been squired by young Fortescue to said swank bistros.

"I seem to recall your having mentioned once or twice that you would like to sink your red nails into some of his fortune," I said. "But I don't remember anything to the effect that you were getting anywhere with your plans."

Again Babs laughed. This time in knowing triumph.

"I ain't seen you since last week, Stevie," she said. "A lot can happen inna week. I think Terry is definitely getting that way about a certain young chorine who is me."

My eyes widened. Babs was a smart young wench. Cold and more than calculating, she knew damned well what she had always longed for in life. She had always longed for a life that was spelled with a big dollar sign in front of it. It wasn't likely that she'd bandy such statements around without reason. And if she said she was getting close to the Fortescue millions, maybe there was something to it.

"Well," I said. "Well, I'm damned. You kidding, Babs?"

"Why you think I quit my job, Stevie?" Babs asked.

"Huh?" I asked. "Has he—"

Babs cut me off. "Oh no. Not that, Stevie. Don't jump at no conclusions like that. I don't want that part of the Fortescue cash. I want to be Missus Fortescue, nothing else. Guys like Terry find it a lot tougher to shake a dame they marry than a dame they just get mink coats for. A lot tougher, and more expensive. So I'm shooting for the Missus Fortescue role."

"But quitting your job," I said, "sounds like you figure you are practically walking down the aisle with Terry Fortescue right now. Has he mentioned anything similar to that?"

Babs shook her head. "Not quite. But he has invited me along on a cruise on his yotch tonight, no less. We will watch the New Yawk dimout from the rails of said yotch and speak romantic lingo to each other, and I think I will hook him then and there."

I whistled. "Baby, if you can swing that young moneybags into a wedding ring, you'll—"

Babs cut me off. "An' that's why I quit my job today, see? My boss, Georgie Slonski, insisted what I should work tonight when I wanted the evening off for Terry's yotch party, see? Nacherly, I told Slonski what to do with his job."

"Naturally," I agreed. "A shot at a million or more bucks doesn't stand a chance against a mere job." I sighed, thinking of how I might have been born a wise, hard, pretty wench like Babs instead of a guy who had to make his own million.

Nick came back with Babs' stinger, and I pulled out a half dollar and paid for it.

Babs looked at me in surprise. "You said you was broke," she said.

"I am," I agreed. "And that represents the second drink I was going to have for myself. But, what the hell, it isn't every day I get a chance to make a friendly gesture with a potential millionairess."

"I will recollect you," Babs said with dignity, "in my will, my good man."

"Just remember me in the divorce courts, baby," I said, "in case you want some first rate publicity. I'll probably be down to that by then."

"Toojeers lamoor!" Babs said, raising her drink.

"Same to you," I nodded gloomily,

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picking up my hat. "And good luck, baby."

THERE wasn't much to do but go back to the office, although it was now almost six in the evening, and all respectable working offices had closed their doors. I'd decided against dinner, since I might need the dough if I got back to my rooming house and found myself locked out.

When I went back up to my office I found the lights on inside and the door halfway open. I could hear the scrape of things being moved and mops being wielded, and I realized that the night cleaning women were at work tidying up the offices of the building.

I went into the office to see what sort of rearranging Becky — she's the hatchet-faced, huge-bosomed s c r u b woman who generally supervised the cleaning of the offices on my floor—had done to the usual welter of papers and magazines on my desk.

She inevitably deplored the wild arrangement of everything on my desk, and invariably succeeded in dumping half the papers into the waste basket by the time she made them shipshape.

I could see her big broad back bent busily over my desk as I stepped into the office. And undoubtedly she had heard my entrance; for she straightened up swiftly, guiltily.

"Hello, Becky. Messing up my desk again?" I asked, mixing jollity with truth.

But Becky didn't turn around. She began, instead, to cough. A quick, gagging, choking cough.

I stepped swiftly over to the desk, thinking to pound her on her broad back; since her coughing sounded as if she'd something caught in her throat.

And at that instant she stopped coughing and turned—her hatchet face crimson—to face me.

Her face was crimson from coughing. But there was the damnedest look in her eyes. Almost a guilty look. And then I saw why.

The bottle of Casanova Capsules, the Venus Vial, stood open on my desk, cork stopper beside it—and there were only three pills left where once there had been four.

Becky had been sampling, and almost choked to death on one of the pills when I came into the room and interrupted said sampling.

I suddenly began to laugh at her expression. It was the startled glance of a frightened horse. And it was something else I couldn't quite place, but which was equally hilarious.

I continued to guffaw, while Becky caught her breath and fought for a return to her usually bovine calm.

Her breath returned. But her bovine calm just wasn't. There was something else. Something shining naked and unashamed from her blue, saucer-big eyes. Something that looked awfully like—admiration and breathless awe. But in an instant, I realized that it wasn't either awe or admiration. It was *adoration*. In short, love!

"Mister Boswell!" Becky exclaimed, wringing her big red mitts as coyly as a schoolgirl. "Mister Boswell, you frightened me!"

Then, so help me God, she flicked the pale lashes of her baggy eyes up and down rapidly and shot me an oh-you-marvelous-man stare!

I was crazy. I was certain I was crazy. But I stepped back out of range of Becky's immediate clutches. I couldn't be certain what her next reaction would be.

"Heh — heh," I muttered. "Sorry. Sorry I frightened you. But, everything looks spic and span; yes, it does. You, er, won't have to touch another thing. You, er, can just run along to

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the next office eh?"

BECKY took a step toward me, almost putting her size twelve foot into her scrub bucket. She simpered cutely at this near miss and batted her lashless lids at me again.

"I always try like to keep things spic and span, Mister Boswell," she cooed. "That's the way I keep homes. Clean like. I cook good, too."

I ran a finger around my collar and stepped back another pace. I recalled that Becky was married to a middle-aged giant in excellent shape who stoked flaming hearths in some steel mill.

"That's fine," I choked. "Your husband is a lucky man. Now, er, if you'll just excuse me, I think I'll get to work."

But Becky didn't seem willing to let the sordid matters of toil tarnish her new-found emotions. She moved toward me again, batting those unglamorous lids coyly.

"Mr. Boswell," she said huskily, "I think that I love you!"

I stepped quickly back, putting out my hands in self-defense. After all, Becky was at least five feet eleven and two hundred and forty pounds worth of women, and I wouldn't have much chance if she suddenly wanted to neck.

"Now look," I began. "You have a husband and a home, Becky. Undoubtedly you have children as old as I am, or, anyway, almost as old. I, er, just don't think any romance between the two of us would er, be appropriate under those circumstances. Do you?"

Becky sighed, her huge bosom heaving ponderously.

"I *know* I am loving you, Mister Boswell!" she husked throatily. "And nothing in the way of love stands!"

"Very nicely put," I muttered, making for the door.

Becky made a lunge for me, and I grabbed hard for the door handle to swing it open and make my escape. I missed, and Becky sailed headlong toward me in a massive rush of love-bent exertion. I ducked and scooted off to one side. She collided heavily against the door.

But that didn't stop her. She turned around, realigning her directions, and spied me trying to get behind the shelter of my desk. She beamed lovingly and sailed forth for the desk. I held my dash; keeping the desk between the two of us would be my best chance. Or so I reasoned.

Becky reached the desk, and I was on the other side. She started to her left, and I started around to my left, keeping a nice space of mahogany between us. She chortled coyly. Obviously, to her, we were playing a gay little game—a sort of lovers' romp.

But the romp had more than usual complications. For I now found myself wedged in between the desk and the wall, and realized that Becky was shoving the desk harder and harder into my stomach to trap me where I stood!

"Nothing," she said huskily again, "in the way of love stands!"

I tried desperately to squirm loose and make a dash for the door. But it was no use. I couldn't budge. And now Becky, lovelight glowing in her bovine blue eyes, held the desk fast with one hand and proceeded cautiously around the side toward me.

I made a gurgling cry of despair, and closed my eyes.

It was at that instant that I heard the door open, and the startled gasp that followed it.

I OPENED my eyes. Martha, a thin, dour scrubwoman who teamed with Becky, stood on the threshold staring at the scene bug-eyed.

"Becky!" she bleated. "And Mister Boswell!"

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It broke the spell for Becky. Or, at least, it intruded enough on her private little love chase to make her crimson in sudden embarrassment and break into a fit of cowish sounds that were intended for girlish giggles. She released the pressure against the desk, and I was able to push it back and breathe freely.

Martha still surveyed the scene with wonder, her thin, sour little features grimacing in bewilderment.

"Heh-heh," I tried for Martha's benefit, "I was just showing Becky a dusty spot she missed on the floor."

But big Becky didn't help matters a bit. She repeated her giggling salvo at this, blinking her lashes—practically nonexistent—coyly in my direction.

But I'd already had enough. Martha's sudden appearance had been a Godsend, and I was determined to take advantage of her presence to make my escape. I mopped my brow quickly with a handkerchief, grabbed up the Venus Vial, pushed the cork stopper into it, slipped it into my pocket and headed for the door. . . .

OUT in the street in front of the office building I stopped and caught my breath. My knees were knocking and my palms were moist. And a gradual realization of the cause for what had happened was creeping up on me. When it hit, it almost commandoed me into a coma.

I had had a subconscious realization of the cause of Becky's actions right from the minute I saw the open Venus Vial and realized that she'd popped a pill into her mouth. But her actions from that minute on hadn't given me any time for any further rationalization. I'd been too busy avoiding her clutches to give any thought to the reason behind them.

But now I knew. Knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Peter P. Paxton's Venus Vial of Casanova Capsules had been the one and only cause for the sudden love for Stephen B. Boswell which had been inspired in the heart of Becky the behemoth scrublady.

And little inventor Paxton's words concerning the action of his Casanova Capsules came back coherently enough to make me aware that I had undoubtedly been the first person poor Becky encountered after trying the pill. The result—as little Paxton had predicted—was Becky's whole-hearted affection for me.

In short, the damned pills weren't phony. *They were the genuine article, the very thing Paxton had said they were!*

I pulled the Venus Vial out of my coat pocket and looked at it closely, unbelievingly, beneath the street lamp. I shook my head, awed, frightened a little but damned well convinced of the strictly weird powers they possessed.

Dropping the Venus Vial back in my pocket, I turned right, which took me straight into Eric's saloon.

Nick, who had only been the daytime bartender, was off duty by now. In his place for the hour before the other bartender came onto night shift, was Eric himself, owner of the joint. The man who had issued instructions to Nick that very morning that I was to be given no more credit.

"Hello, Eric," I said cheerfully, taking a stool at the bar.

Eric is blonde, thin, with a creased face that always looks suspiciously at the world. He nodded his answer to my greeting glumly.

"I'll have a rye and water," I said. I really needed it, now that I was fully aware of the Venus Vials' incredible value.

"I am sorry I cannot let you have no more credit, Steve," Eric said. He

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didn't sound a bit sorry. "You want a drink, it will have to be cash you pay for it."

"I already know that," I said. "I was in once already today." I threw a half dollar on the bar. "Hustle along a rye and water."

Eric looked at the half dollar as if he wanted to bite it to make sure of its silver content. Then he moved off to get a bottle and the glasses.

I touched the outline of the vial lying there in my coat pocket, and a chill ran along my spine. My God—a guy who could make pills with powers like that was worth a million bucks a minute. I was already going over some tricky legal clauses in my mind. Legal nooses with which I planned to tie up Peter P. Paxton the minute I got my hands on him again.

For I was going to see him again, all right. Even if I had to turn out the entire town in a search for him. I was going to find that little guy and drag him back into the office with a tractor, if necessary, and take him up on the offer he had made that very afternoon.

Through my mind was running a recollection of some of the other pills and potions he'd mentioned. Pills to bring wealth. Pills to bring good luck. Potions to bring happiness, etc. It was staggering to think of. Supposing all the other pills and potions he'd mentioned were just as effective as his Venus Vial of Casanova Capsules?

ERIC brought back the bottle, shot glass, and water glass and scooped up the half dollar. He gave me a sour grimace as I filled the shot glass with an unsteady hand.

"Boozing it up?" he asked nastily.

Some of the rye slopped over the shot glass and onto the bar. Eric glared even more balefully at this. And then I had a sudden, wonderful idea.

"Pedro and Juanita on duty upstairs?" I asked.

Pedro and Juanita were the Cuban couple who served as chef and waitress in the tiny alcove dining room Eric maintained upstairs on the second floor of his place.

Eric nodded glumly. "They just came on duty. I had to give that Pedro hell for being late again. How he thinks I can work up any food trade when he's never around—"

Eric, as usual, was just grousing for the hell of it. He, and everyone else, knew that his joint's dinner trade didn't exist, and that the only function of his food service was for late sandwiches and snacks for his drinking trade.

But I grinned at his saying he gave Pedro hell. Pedro was a huge, angry giant of a Latin with a temper like a volcano. He was also too fine a chef to risk losin' by a bawling out.

"Have a drink, Eric?" I asked pleasantly, thinking of this.

Eric nodded quickly, a false smile sliding onto his sour pan. He grabbed a bottle of the very best brandy, took a glass, and filled himself a snifter which he spoiled with added soda.

"That's six-bits, Stevie," Eric said happily.

I reached into my wallet, pulled out a worn dollar bill, and tossed it on the bar. I cocked my head to one side, pretending to be listening.

"Say, isn't your telephone ringing?" I asked.

Eric had his telephone in a small room behind the bar. He cocked his head to one side.

"Don't think so," he said. He took up my dollar bill, rang up the cash register, and gave me back a quarter.

"Sure it is," I said.

Eric frowned, put his glass of brandy and soda on the bar, and went

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back into the tiny telephone room.

I got out the Venus Vial but quick. I took out a Casanova Capsule and dropped it into his brandy and soda. I didn't have to stir it. It dissolved like water, almost instantly.

Eric came back from the telephone room just as I popped the Venus Dial back into my pocket. He looked annoyed.

"Party musta hung up," he announced. "Least, they weren't ringing any when I got to the telephone."

Eric, fortunately, was a trifle deaf. His ear had been too long attuned only to cash registers.

I watched him pick up his brandy and soda. He took a long swig on it, smacking his lips. Then he frowned, looked at the glass, took another long swig, and put it on the bar.

"Funny," he said. "This doesn't taste quite right."

"Maybe," I suggested, "you watered the bottle too much."

HE glared at me and picked up his glass for another long swig. It might have tasted like hell to him, but he wasn't going to waste it. Again he frowned and smacked his lips. The glass was now almost empty. He shook his head doubtfully, lifted the glass, and drained the last of the contents.

"I'll steer clear of that bottle," I smirked. "If it's that bad."

"There's nothing wrong with my stock—" Eric began.

And then I cocked my head to one side again, pretending to listen.

"Say," I said. "Your pretty waitress, Pedro's wife, is calling you."

Eric frowned. "I don't hear any call for anybody."

"That was Juanita's voice," I said. "I'd swear to it. Anyway, it came from upstairs and it said something about something being broken."

This was all Eric needed. "Broken?" he bleated. "Those stupid oafs ain't gonna smash stuff without it is deduct from their pay!"

I watched him move around to the front of the bar and start headlong for the staircase leading to the second floor dining alcove. He was carrying the contents of one Casanova Capsule inside him, and rushing up to confront the rather attractive waitress wife of a giant Cuban with a temper like a cobra and a pair of arms like twin pythons.

I grinned happily.

"Cut off my credit, will yuh?" I gloated.

I heard Eric's voice begin an angry sentence that suddenly changed to a sentence that was anything but angry. I heard Juanita's voice rise sharply in amazement. Then there was the crash of dishes and the sound of a loud slap. This was followed instantly by a shrill scream from Juanita. A scream for vengeance from her giant-chef husband.

My grin became Cheshire, and widened even more when my ears heard a bull-throated bellow from Pedro, arriving on the scene between his wife and Eric.

The sounds after that were faint, furious, tremendous. It seemed as if something like a sack of wheat was being thrown carelessly back and forth across the dining room alcove, smashing whatever it happened to land on.

Eric had undoubtedly fallen madly in love with Juanita on seeing her—the guaranteed result of a Casanova Capsule. And Pedro, her husband, had come down to lend physical resentment to Juanita's vocal disdain of Eric's newly born affection for her.

The sounds went on for another four or five minutes, in which time Eric's night bartender arrived to ask me what

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in the hell was going on upstairs. I shrugged, and told him that maybe he'd better wait until it was over, and that perhaps he might call the police and an ambulance.

While the night bartender got frantically on the telephone, Eric suddenly came down the staircase without touching a single step. He literally flew, like something hurled by a weight thrower. The weight thrower and his pretty and indignant wife clumped angrily down the stairs after their ex-employer a minute later. Both Pedro and Juanita wore their hats and coats and were far too irate to draw any back salary before severing connections with Eric's establishment. They stormed out of the door in a tempest of Latin verbs.

I looked happily at Eric's quite unconscious form lying there at the bottom of the staircase. Then I went over, rolled him on one side, and held him that way long enough to remove seventy-five cents from his pocket.

THE night bartender, white-faced and frightened, came back from the telephone an instant later. He saw his boss and almost fainted.

"Maybe you better prepare to take over the management of this place completely for the rest of the night," I suggested. "Eric doesn't look like he'll be able to be much of a boss for at least the remainder of the evening."

"What am I gonna tell the cops when they come?" the night barkeep worriedly wondered.

I explained—with kind tact—that since Eric had been beaten up by Pedro because he'd gotten fresh with Pedro's wife, that it might be wise to skip that end of it entirely.

"Eric wouldn't want anything like that in the papers," I amplified. "I'm sure, if he were conscious, he wouldn't want any part of the mess to get to the ears of the cops. They'd drag Pedro and Juanita in, and there'd be a big stink. Better just say he fell down the stairs."

Which, as it developed ten minutes later when the cops and the ambulance arrived almost simultaneously, was just what the night bartender told. I chimed in as a witness, and they carried Eric off on a stretcher, convinced that he had had a most unusual fall down a remarkably short flight of stairs. . . .

OF COURSE, until other patrons began to float into the bar about a half hour later, Rollie—that was the night bartender's name—and I had considerable small talk over the unfortunate happenstance of Eric's. And the excited small talk called for buying drinks back and forth. This was easy enough to do, since Eric hadn't had time to tell Rollie that I wasn't to have any more credit. So Rollie and I got along famously, and he cheerfully marked up my chits on the pad beside the cash register, unaware that his boss would have lost his mind had he witnessed it.

For Stephen B. Boswell, life was indeed resuming its rosily cheerful tinge.

In my pocket was proof that one Peter P. Paxton was a chemical genius beyond even the wildest dreams of druids or alchemists. A genius who, I was firmly confident, would make Stephen B. Boswell the richest man in the world beginning promptly on the morrow.

What small qualms I might have had about his willingness to accept my backing, inasmuch as I had called him unpleasant names and tossed him out of my office, were easily dispersed by the realization that I would be dealing with a genius who was, fortunately, an

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utter, babbling ass.

He most certainly had to be a mental zero, I reasoned, to be walking around town at large with his incredible pills and potions, unable to make a nickel off them. No one but a nitwit would have taken such an approach to the problem of getting backing for the inventions of the age. No one but a hopelessly insipid little jerk like Peter P. Paxton would have thought of confining his sales appeal to cheap, fraudulent-sounding advertisements in obscure newspapers and magazines.

Paxton was a genius, no doubt of that. But he was also a dimwit who needed the guiding light of a Big Mind to lead him. And Stephen B. Boswell was going to be that guide.

It occurred to me then, that I might as well begin lining myself up a campaign of promotion for the Paxton Pills and Potions. And it occurred to me, also, that I might just as well begin to figure exactly how and where I was going to raise the fat hunk of cash which would be necessary to launch such a promotion.

Over my sixth or eighth rye and water, I began to do a little thinking on the matter.

There was, quite naturally, no one in the United States who would advance a stitch of credit to one Stephen B. Boswell. I couldn't blame anyone for this sound national attitude, of course, but it wasn't going to help matters any.

It was clear, nevertheless, that Stephen B. Boswell in control of a potential million billion bucks worth of chemical genius was an entirely different guy than Stephen B. Boswell, who was one jump ahead of the wolf, in a bottom rung, one-man advertising agency. On the strength of little Paxton, therefore, rested the lever with which I should be able to pry loose enough cash to get the thing rolling.

Any bank, any promoter, any—well, anyone with the dough and good sense, would advance all the cash you needed to promote Peter P. Paxton's Pills and Potions. All you had to do was tell them what you had and sit back and wait for the dough. Simple.

I GRINNED confidently at my glass and dipped my snoot for a short snort. It was simple, yessir.

Or was it?

It suddenly occurred to me what a hell of a time little Peter P. Paxton must have had making the rounds with his pills and potions. And it occurred to me that walking into a reputable bank, business office, or promotion den to announce that you'd developed pills and potions to win love, riches, good health, etc. would not be quite the simple task it seemed. You would, of necessity, encounter a great deal of skepticism. Skepticism such as I met Paxton with. The throw-em-out-immediately sort of skepticism.

But then, I reasoned, Paxton had been a dimwit, a mouse. A Great Mind, such as Steve Boswell for example, would be much more smooth in breaking the ice to announce the astonishing truth of the potent pills.

I was nodding emphatically to myself over this when I heard a voice at my side. I turned. It was Babs Cartier, the blonde baby who was supposed to be digging her claws into Terry Fortescue's million dollar heart at that moment.

"Hello," was all she'd said. Her hard, pretty little face was as dour as crepe at a wake.

"Well, well," I replied. "Fancy seeing you here. I thought you were supposedly yachting tonight with a million dollars and more."

"Hah!" snorted Babs Cartier unmu-

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sically. "Hah!"

"What happened?" I asked.

"The old stand up," Babs answered savagely. "The old bunkola. The heave-ho. A telephone call from little Terry Fortescue himself telling me how sorry he was to say that the yotch party was off."

"Sort of last minute-ish, wasn't it?" I observed.

"Hah!" Babs said again. She reached into her purse and pulled out a clipping from a local gossip column. She pointed to a paragraph in the column. "Read that," she commanded.

I read it. It was interesting reading, and—from Babs' point of view—strictly tragic information.

"The unexpected arrival of Marlene Marsh, Boston socialite beauty, today, had Terry Fortescue, young man about millions, in quite a dither. Young Fortescue, as you all know, has long been considered matrimony-proof. But friends of Miss Marsh and the young millionaire have long predicted an eventual merger between the two. All this column can say to such talk is that young Fortescue has definitely cancelled all other engagements while Miss Marsh is here."

I handed the clipping back to her.

"Ugh!" I grunted. "Right below the heart."

Babs put the clipping back into her purse.

"The stinker," she said. "The lousy double-crossing stinker."

"Have a drink," I invited her, "and cool off." I signaled Rollie the bartender. "A stinger for Miss Cartier," I said.

"I thought you was broke," Babs said suspiciously.

I waved my hand expansively. "My dear young lady, that is the way fortune changes. I am now by way of being close to several million dollars."

ROLLIE came over with her stinger and Babs took a sip. "Don't tell me that," she said. "A horse musta come in for you in the last race."

I smiled tolerantly. I could afford to be tolerant. Besides, I was getting a little tight.

"As you wish, young lady. But tonight the liquor is on me."

And it was precisely that. Every drop of it—which must have totalled gallons. I really celebrated, on credit of course. It must have been around three or four in the morning when they finally poured me out of the place and into a taxi. I was drunk-smart enough to borrow ten bucks from the bartender and have it put on my bill.

If the landlady had waited up to catch me for my back room rent, she'd given up the ghost by the time I stumbled up to my room. At any rate, she wasn't there with her hand out, and I was able to fall into bed undisturbed by crass problems of finance.

I remember that my last muddled thought before falling off into a dead sleep concerned the irony of Fate which had so reversed the scheme of things to smile on Babs one moment and me the next. . . .

THE morning of my first day of search for Peter P. Paxton, the eccentric little merchant of Venus, dawned bright and late. It was almost noon before I came out of my alcoholic slumber. The reconstruction of the previous night's happenings was quick and complete up to the point where the fog set in in the wee hours at Eric's bar.

I looked in the pocket of my coat immediately, and sighed in relief to find the Venus Vial still there. Two pills were left, since Becky had eaten one, and I'd slipped the other maliciously to Eric.

However, the amount of pills left

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wasn't really important in face of the fact that I'd have all—and all types—I wanted as soon as I located little Peter Paxton.

I managed to slip out of my room without running into the landlady, and I had a light breakfast of tomato juice and bromo seltzer in a nearby drugstore. There I plotted my first moves in the hunt for Paxton.

Several advertisements in the personal columns of the daily papers would be the first step. Then I could discreetly contact all the agencies to which Paxton had probably gone before he came to mine, in the hope that he might have left his address and telephone number with one of them before getting thrown out on his ear.

I got to a telephone and called the dailies, inserting an ad to run two days in each, simultaneously.

"P. P. Paxton," it said briefly, *"get in touch with Boswell Advertising Agency at once. To your profit."*

If he saw it, or if anyone who knew him saw it, it would bring results. Feeling good about having begun my chase, I headed for the office.

There was no mail at the office. But there was a sheet of note paper, folded and scented with coarse soap, which had been shoved through the letter slot on the door.

I picked it up, curious, and opened it.

It was a personal note written in a huge, scrawly hand with a smudgy pencil stub.

Deer Stivun:

Nothing in tha wey uv luve stans.

Yrs ferever,

Becky.

I sighed and tossed the note in the wastebasket, wondering how long the force of the Casanova Capsule was supposed to last, and making a mental note to be out of the office that evening before Becky arrived for cleaning.

Then I got on the telephone and began check calls to all the advertising agencies or promotional outfits Paxton might have tried before he ended up at my office.

AFTER more than an hour of this, one rather strange fact was clear. Peter P. Paxton hadn't visited another advertising or promotion outfit in town. Mine had been the first, and apparently only, place he'd come!

Damned puzzled, I'd left word with each place that, should a jerk answering to his name and description wander in, they should send him immediately to my office. I knew that they'd all do so only too willingly.

My head was still splitting a trifle, and I decided on a little of the hair of the dog that bit me. I went down to Eric's bar. Nick was on duty behind the spigots.

"How's Eric?" I asked him.

Nick's expression became pained. He shook his head in genuine bewilderment.

"They let him out of the hospital at eight this morning, and whatta you think he done?"

I shrugged.

"He headed over to the house where Pedro and Juanita live," Nick said in awe. "Can you imagine that?"

"What for, to have them arrested?" I asked.

Nick spread his hands wide in futile dismay. "Not on your life. He went over there to try to take Juanita away from Pedro—the nut!"

Again I wondered how long the Paxton Venus Vial Casanova Capsule held effect.

"Where is Eric now?" I asked.

"Back in the hospital," Nick said

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despairingly. "Banged up even worse this time."

I hid a grin behind a yawn.

"A rye and water, Nick," I said . . .

FOR two days I waited patiently for results from either my personal-column ads or my calls to places Paxton might visit with his pills. But nothing happened, aside from the fact that Eric got out of the hospital once more and tried to woo Juanita, only to get sent back to said hospital by the now thoroughly incensed Pedro. And, oh yes, Becky left me two more notes, pretty much like the first, and I thought I saw her prowling around the neighborhood of my rooming house on the second night.

But as for Peter P. Paxton—no soap.

I was getting a little bit desperate but not completely so, if you know what I mean. Calmly, I reasoned that such a search would take a little time. Maybe three days, or four, or even five.

But I cooked up a scheme to put into action on the third day, if I still hadn't found Paxton. And when the end of the third day came along with no merchant of Venus, I put it into effect.

I went to a police station and registered a complaint of robbery and assault. Then I described Peter P. Paxton as accurately as I could remember him, and said that that was the description of the bandit assailant.

Which started the gendarmes searching for my man.

They didn't seem to be doing much good, but I renewed the personal column pleas for another two days, and made another check on all the agencies and promotion spots I'd tried at first. No. They still hadn't seen a sign of anyone answering to that description or name.

By the fourth day the furrows in my brow looked like plow ruts. There was still not a trace of Paxton. I thought of hiring a private gumshoe agency to get on Paxton's trail. But aside from not having nearly enough dough to cover such a costly search, I wasn't sure that they could do more than the cops could.

There was nothing to do but wait, and grow gray.

Eric made the newspapers on the fifth day. He had tried to see Juanita after getting out of the hospital again, and Pedro, after mauling him to beat hell, had called he cops. They tossed him into a hospital, where he waited hearing on a malice count sponsored by both Juanita and Pedro. But I was too worried to appreciate the fine good humor of this.

There were flowers, weedy things, in a glass jar on my desk that fourth morning. Around the wilting stem of each was wrapped a love note from Becky the scrubwoman.

By the end of the fifth day, I was beating my brow to a pulp with my palm. My nails were gnawed to bloody stumps, and my nerves were as frayed as a pair of pants in the Reich. I had to do something, inasmuch as every passing minute proved more and more conclusively that Peter P. Paxton didn't seem to want to be found. But what could I do that I hadn't done already?

It was then that the horrible suspicion hit me. Supposing Peter P. Paxton couldn't be located because of the simple fact that someone, some promoter or guy wiser than I'd been, had listened to him, found out the incredible truth about Paxton's potions and pills, and signed him up tighter than a drum?

The thought made me want to vomit. And yet, the more it tugged at the sleeve of my mind, the more I was forced to

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admit that it was not too illogical. After all, Peter P. Paxtons don't just disappear into thin air. And the methods I'd used to locate him were as thorough as any fairly inventive mind with no income could concoct.

I felt like a guy tied to a chair and forced to watch millions of dollars used to light an idiot's cigars. For millions of dollars would certainly be mine if I could corral the Paxton phantom. But every minute that passed without my finding him, meant more and more of my dream dough going up in smoke.

MAYBE it was because I was beginning to resign myself to the fact I wouldn't find Paxton, or maybe it was because I was feeling more and more certain that somebody else already had Paxton—but at any rate, on the morning of the sixth day I went to a chemical analysis outfit with the Venus Vial in my pocket.

There I turned over one of the remaining pills, telling them that I wanted the thing broken into a thousand atoms, if possible, to find out precisely what its contents were.

If I couldn't find Paxton I could at least make an effort to find out the secret of one of his most incredible potion-pills. That would be certainly better than nothing.

I sat in the waiting room of the chemical analysis company going quietly mad while a tall, bespectacled young man in a stained smock put the pill through their deductive analysis lab.

The wait was over an hour. Finally, however, the tall, somber young chemist came out and blinked at me through his horn rimmed specs. He was shaking his head wonderingly, and a trifle apologetically.

"Well?" I bleated, my voice cracking like a choir boy's. "Well, did you discover what's in it?"

The young man sighed.

"I have absolutely no idea, sir. It is the strangest stuff I've ever seen. I can't begin to tell you what elements, chemical or otherwise, are contained in that pill. We put it through every sort of test. We broke it down to ground dust and tested that. Still no results. Our final test, a solution immersion process, dissolved the dust utterly."

I groaned feebly.

"Perhaps," said the young man, "you could give us another one of those pills and we could run a second test. Maybe that would disclose something."

I shook my head hysterically. "No," I gurgled. "No. Absolutely no. It's the last one I have left!"

The young chemist stared at me in astonishment.

"Very well, sir. Just as you like. It's entirely up to you."

I left the joint at practically a dead run. The single Casanova Capsule left in the Venus Vial bounced tauntingly around in my pocket.

The rest of the day I spent checking most futilely my trap lines on Paxton. Of course there was nothing doing. Not a sign, not a trace, of the maddening little man.

In the meantime I went through the torments of the damned wondering about the chemical analysis that had been made on the pill. I wondered if the chemists had known their stuff. I wondered if perhaps they hadn't blundered in testing the pill. I wondered if another chemical analysis company might not succeed where they had failed. I thought of submitting the last pill to such a test. But of course, I didn't dare. For if they gummed up the works on the analysis, I'd have nothing left. For, even with just one pill remaining to my name, there was some fragment of hope left for me in case I

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couldn't find Paxton. And all the handwriting on any wall pointed to the fact that it didn't look like I'd ever find him.

I WENT into Eric's bar about six o'clock that night, badly in need of the stimulant I sought.

Rollie was on duty, and the only other customer in the place—with whom Rollie was discussing Eric's coming malice trial worriedly—was Babs Cartier.

I slid onto a stool before the bar.

"The usual thing," I croaked. "Only double."

Babs turned, a woeful pair of brown eyes on me.

"Well, well," she said listlessly. "For a guy who was buying for the house the last time I saw you, you don't look so gay. What become of that million dollar deal you was yapping about all that night, palsie?"

I grunted dismally, sliding the verbal knife turn-about into her ribs.

"You have nothing to wheeze about," I said. "How's your ex-boy friend and millionaire catch you were sure of about that same time? Has he gotten engaged to Marlene Marsh of the Boston Marshes yet?"

Babs Cartier sighed. But her brown eyes were angry.

"I'd like to fix that louse good," she said. She picked up a newspaper at her elbow. "He cost me a lot of dough."

"Dream dough," I said. "His dough. Dough that you were already spending before you landed the fish."

Babs had opened the newspaper to the society pages. She pointed to a picture spread two-column in the center. Atop the pix was the caption: *"Engagement Announcement Tonight."*

I recognized the soft, rather nice-looking guy in the pix as no one other than Terry Fortescue himself. The girl, a lean, hungry-looking dame—in the approved Vogue style — with a horsey, society caste to her features, was unknown to me. But the blurb beneath the picture identified her as Marlene Marsh of Boston.

To one side of the two column spread of the picture, there was another two column spread of newsprint dealing with nothing but the fact that the engagement of Miss Marsh to Mr. Fortescue was to be announced that very evening on his yacht. A special party for the occasion was, of course, in order. And all the intimate friends and family members of both the prospective groom and bride would be there.

My eyes widened, and I gulped the double rye Rollie brought me. I turned to Babs.

"Well, do you concede defeat!" I asked.

She nodded glumly. "What else could I concede—victory?"

"The Marsh dame's victory," I pointed out.

"Ah, and I had the whole thing planned so perfect-like," Babs snorted disgustedly. "I figgered two or three months as Missus Terry Fortescue, buying up all the clothes and cars and things I wanted—"

"Not cars," I reminded her.

She ignored this, going on with a recounting of her thwarted plans. "I figgered after a few months robbing the till fer all it was worth I could head fer Reno on a wave of big time publicity," she said despondently. "Think what alla publicity, photos an all, would mean to my stage ambitions, and such, after the divorce," she ended lamely.

"Not to mention," I added by way of adding to her remorse, "the neat stack of dough you could have collected by way of a divorce settlement. Why, I'll bet it would have amounted to at least six or eight hundred grand!"

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"Yeah," said Babs tiredly. "I think I'll have another stinger on that."

WHILE she ordered her drink, I took a squint at the picture of the Marsh dame again. She looked to be strictly the hunt club and pain in the neck type, if you get what I mean. I suddenly felt a little sorry for the poor little rich boy Terry Fortescue. Even if the Marsh dame hadn't stepped in, he probably would have been hooked by Babs, or some hard, chiseling little creature like her. He couldn't win no matter which may he turned.

After the next drink, Babs and I dropped our mutual verbal rub-it-ins. We drank for another hour in silence for the most part, each of us wrapped up in his own problem.

Me, I was turning over my woes about Patxon and his apparent non-existence again and again in my mind. The more I knocked myself out with these worries, the more certain I became that my sum total in assets from Paxton would never amount to any more than the one Casanova Capsule I still had left in the Venus Vial.

And the more I realized this fact, the sicker and sicker I got. What could I do with one pill—even if it was the incredible potion that I knew it to be?

I could sell it at auction, I told myself with bitter bad humor. Or I could use the Venus Vial, capsule inside, as a paper weight and everlasting reminder of the fact that I once almost had a million bucks in my hands. Or I could down it with my next rye and water and shoot myself for falling in love with Babs Cartier. Oh, yes, I could do all of those things. But where could I make a nickle from it?

There didn't seem to be any answer to that one. And another hour of mutual silence passed while Babs and I drowned our sorrows.

"I wish," Babs broke the silence long enough to observe as she lifted her sixth stinger, "that I could be on that damn yotch of his tonight. I'd scratch that Marsh dame's eyes out, and kick that Fortescue-you-know-where. Where's she figger she's so much? She probably has ideas on his moola just like I had."

I shrugged, taking my mind momentarily from the problems of pills, potions and missing Paxtons.

"She's rich as hell, probably, baby. She isn't after his dough," I answered.

Babs eyebrows went up angrily. "Rich, is she? Why, the greedy little minx. She's got dough and wants more, that's her trouble!"

I managed a weak grin at this reasoning.

"I just wish I could be there, though," Babs repeated. "I'd raise some hell they'd never forget."

"It's a pity they didn't invite you," I said. "It must have been an oversight, undoubtedly. After all, you're more or less of an intimate friend of the groom, and it said in the newspaper that—"

My voice trailed off and my eyes must have started blinking like beacons. For it was in the middle of that last sentence that the Great Idea hit me in the cranium.

"Babs!" I blurted, grabbing her arm. "Babs—we got something, baby!"

She blinked at me as if I'd lost my mind. But I had climbed off the bar stool, and still had hold of her arm.

"Come on upstairs to the dining room alcove, baby. We'll be able to talk this over alone up there. It's terrific!"

"Listen—" Babs began petulantly. But the gleam in my eye and the excitement in my voice brought out her female curiosity.

"Okay, okay," she said. "Only don't break my arm in that bear trap clutch."

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I RELEASED her arm and started upstairs to the dining room, Babs right behind me. There was no one in the alcove, so we had all the privacy our conversation would need.

"Listen," I said, pushing her into a chair, and pulling up another across the table from her, "you said you'd like to be on board that boat tonight, didn't you?"

"Huh?" Babs asked, blinking bewilderedly.

"You said you'd like to be aboard Terry Fortescue's yacht tonight for the party which is to announce his engagement to Marlene Marsh, didn't you?"

Babs' jaw went hard and her eyes cold.

"Brother, you're talking," she agreed emphatically.

"Now look," I said, putting a hand on her arm to brace her for the coming shock, "how'd you like not only to be aboard, but to wind up this evening engaged to Terry Fortescue?"

"You're outta your mind!" Babs said.

"How'd you like that?" I persisted. "How'd you like it, eh? Engaged to him by the time the party is over tonight, and married to him inside of another day. How'd you like to have that happen?"

"How do cats like canaries?" Babs inquired by way of answer. "But let's cut out this reefer talk. What're you driving at?"

"Now listen," I said. "You gotta listen, and you gotta trust me. You gotta have faith and confidence. Blind faith. Is being Mrs. Terry Fortescue worth the risk of a little blind faith in me?" I demanded.

"Brother," Babs said, "I'd believe in Santa Claus if it could make me Terry Fortescue's wife!"

"All right," I said excitedly. "That's swell. That's fine. That's magnificent. You gotta remember, then, that you're to do everything like I say. If you do, I promise a Mrs. Fortescue rating for you, baby."

Suddenly Babs' eyes narrowed.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Before we go any farther, tell me what's in all this charity for you?"

I grinned. "Frankly, baby, there's plenty in it for me. You see, if I fix it so you marry the young billionaire, you kick back lots of the take to me the minute the wedding bells have stopped ringing, get it?"

"How much of the take?" Babs asked.

I closed my eyes and thought.

"A hundred thousand smackers, baby," I said.

"Are you nuts?" she asked impolitely.

I shook my head confidently. "Not a bit, baby. As Mrs. T. Fortescue you could put your paws on that dough inside of two days after your marriage. Why, he'll probably give you a wedding present of a few hundred grand in your name, just as a starter. And if it isn't worth that much to you, why—" I spread my hands expressively.

Babs' eyes glittered.

"I still think that what you think you can do as a splicer between I and Terry is a pipe dream, dearie," she said. "But if you can do what you say you can, you get the hundred grand. Only," she paused, her eyes speculative, "how do you know I won't welsh on you?"

"I've figured that out, too," I said. "Before we get going on my plan you'll scratch out a brief, informal, but strictly legal promise to pay me a hundred grand on completion of our bargain. It'll hold in any court, and annul your marriage without a cent if you try to welsh and I produce it as evidence."

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Babs nodded. She had gained some confidence in my yet undisclosed scheme just by the fact that I was sold on it to the extent of thinking so far ahead.

"Okay," she said. "Now shoot. What's the dope? Spill it, brother, before I have a heart attack."

I TOOK a deep breath and a firm grip on the edges of the table, and spilled it. Spilled most of it, that is. Among the things I didn't mention was the name of Peter P. Paxton, my attitude, ambitions and search in regard for said character. I just stressed the angle of the Casanova Capsule and what it could do when it was used according to instructions. Only I didn't call it the Casanova Capsule, or mention that it was contained in the Venus Vial, or any of that stuff that would have hooked it up to the point where it was too damned phony for her shrewd but dumb noodle to grasp.

Of course, my first rendition didn't cut any grooves in Babs' enthusiasm. She just listened open-mouthed, staring at me as if I were giving her a pep talk for my candidacy for president. But I'd expected this, and I tore into my talk again, fitting it a little more closely to suit what I'd gathered of her attitude from her first reactions.

"Listen," I repeated, "you gotto have confidence in what I'm telling you. Utter confidence."

"I gotta be crazy," Babs said. "But tell it all to me again, slowly."

Once more I spilled my Big Idea, explaining as much as needed about the pill as I went along. When I finished she looked dubious, which was a distinct improvement over her first reactions. I took a deep breath, then, and went through it all again.

"It's simple," I concluded. "You've been on his boat before. You know how you can start enough of a scene to get him away from his party. You can probably get him to take you to his cabin, so's you won't embarrass him in front of everyone. Then you insist that you're gonna break up the whole thing, and he pleads with you not to be so silly. Then you have a crying jag, see? And when that's over, you dry your tears, smile bravely, and admit that you've been silly and a bum sport. You say you'll leave the yacht right away, and that pleases him no end. But you add that he'll have to promise to have one last drink with you for old time's sake, then and there. The rest is easy. You know how to slip a pill in a guy's drink, certainly. You've worked as a hostess. Once he's slipped the pill, he's hooked. He's yours." I paused to catch my breath, then added lamely, "See?"

There was a long silence in which Babs regarded me soberly and intently. Then she spoke.

"Okay," she said. "I understand it all. Every bit of it. And I can carry it out. But what about the pill? Are you sure you aren't off your trolley on what that'll do to him?"

"That," I said, "is where you gotta have confidence."

There was another long silence while Babs made up her mind, or rather, her brain. Then she nodded suddenly.

"It's a go. We'd better get started pronto, Stevie."

SHE rose, picking up her purse, her eyes filled with the unmistakable fever glint of gold. As for me, my palms were moist. But I wasn't too excited to be asleep at the switch.

"Just a minute, baby," I said, pulling out a big white envelope from my pocket. On the back of the envelope I scratched a brief, legally tying agreement concerning the hundred thousand bucks reward I was to get as Cupid on

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the forthcoming Babs vs. Fortescue match.

"Sign just below," I said, shoving her the paper and handing her my pen.

She did so, her pink tongue thrust out of the corner of her mouth at the literary effort involved in spelling her name correctly. Then I signed under that, and took the envelope back, stuffing it into my wallet.

"Incidentally, baby," I asked. "You got about twenty bucks?"

Babs looked surprised, then angry.

"Listen," she began. "What's the—"

I cut her off, oozing diplomacy. "Frankly, I'm broke, baby. We're gonna need dough for a cab to the pier, and more dough to hire the motorboat to take you out to Fortescue's yacht. After all, you'll be worth millions in a day or two."

The last did it. She opened her purse and pulled out a couple of tens which she tossed haughtily onto the table in the manner of a duchess.

"That makes only ninety-nine thousant, nine hunnert and eighty bucks I owe you on that contrack," she said.

"Babs!" I protested, "millionaires don't act cheap like that!"

"Hah!" she snorted shrewdly. "That's how they stay millionaires, brother!"

IT WAS a little after ten o'clock when we piled into a cab outside of Eric's saloon. And it wasn't more than twenty minutes after that when we'd crossed town and arrived at the pier where I knew a guy who rented motor boats. It took me fully five minutes for me to explain to him what I wanted done.

And then he looked skeptical.

"I dunno," he said. "It's strictly against regulations, y'know."

"Sure I know," I said. "And I know you get about two bucks ordinarily for such a trip. I'm willing to hand you ten for your trouble."

He looked at Babs, eyes narrowing.

"You say the young lady'll wanta have me wait alongside fer her?" he asked. "Running a risk agin getting picked up by harbor patrol, thataway," he said.

"She'll come back with you, or give you a message to send to me," I said. "In either case, you're to wait."

"Dunno," said the man who rented motor boats. "Dunno if it's worth the chance of getting myself in trouble."

"Fifteen bucks," I said, "and that's our last offer."

The man who rented motor boats held out his hand.

"You said it was the Fortescue yacht?" he asked.

I gave him the money. Then I turned to Babs. I took out the Venus Vial in which the last Casanova Capsule remained. I handed it to her.

"Keep it in this vial until time to slip it into his drink," I hissed. "That way there's no chance of losing it. And don't forget. Try to get back here, but if he insists on your staying later, send word back with the motor boat skipper here. Good luck, baby. Remember, I knew you when."

I took her hand and gave it a tight squeeze. The motorboat man was walking out along the damp planks of the wharf to the spot where a speedboat was tied. Babs grinned, nodded, turned and followed after him.

I reached into my pockets for a cigarette. When I lighted it I realized for the first time how badly my hands could shake when they wanted to.

A ferryboat hooted in the harbor, and the motorboat man, already behind the wheel of his craft, helped Babs into it from the slippery pier.

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I took a deep drag on the cigarette and tried to remember how to pray. One hundred grand. One hundred thousand bucks. It made me dizzy to think of . . .

TIME passed. A lot of time. I couldn't tell how much. Four cigarettes worth of time. That was about half an hour, maybe. Maybe longer. I had smoked them chain-fashion down to quarter inch stubs.

It was chilly by the water. But I was cold sweat all over. The ferry-boats hooted out in the harbor and over on the rivers. I told myself that every second passing was a better and better sign that Babs was playing it right.

I began to wonder if she'd try to welsh on that hundred thousand bucks. This gave me something else to think about, and helped pass a little more time.

A little later and I'd smoked up two more cigarettes.

Then I heard the sound of the motorboat coming back toward the wharf. I held my breath and tried to decide if it was the one that would mean everything. I couldn't tell. But the sound of the motor got closer and closer and I was able to see it through the darkness, then.

It was the boat with Babs, all right!

I ran down on the wharf, almost breaking my neck on a slippery spot. By the time I'd picked myself up, the motorboat was less than twenty feet from the mooring, and sliding in purringly at low speed to the wharf.

"Baby!" I yelled, for I couldn't stand the suspense any longer. "Baby—is it set?"

Babs stood up in the back of the motor boat. Her voice rang loud and shrill and angry.

"You blankety blank sonuva blank-blank!" she shrieked.

I almost fell headlong into the water. Sick nausea grabbed at my stomach and I leaned back weakly against the boathouse for support. My knees were turning to water and everything was taking on a gray blur before my eyes. I was but barely conscious that the motorboat was now being tied up expertly, the owner jumping out, and that Babs was being helped up to the wharfside.

I remember trying to keep my knees starched, and that the wet wharf was determined to make my feet go out from under me. I heard the voice of the guy who rented motorboats yelling.

"Derned fool—lookout, ye'll bang yer head on that piling!"

And then I must have banged my head on "that piling," for something cracked the back of my head with sharp, nasty, blackening explosiveness. . . .

SOMEONE was cursing steadily, unmusically, in my ear. And my aching head was being jounced from side to side. I opened my eyes, and after a minute became conscious of the fact that I was propped up in a taxi, beside Babs. Babs, of course, was making with the nasty words.

And suddenly, in spite of aching dome and all, I got red-eyed mad. I sat bolt upright and glared at her.

"So, you've come around, you—" she began wrathfully.

I gnashed my teeth, and cut her off with my own tirade.

"You thick-witted little bundle of blond bovinity!" I snarled. "How in the name of LaGuardia did you mess it up?"

She bared her pearlies in an answering snarl.

"*I* messed it up!" she choked. "*I*

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messed it up? Why, you blank blank descendent of a blank-blank-blank, I carried the whole thing off like perfect! I got on the yotch. I damn near broke up the party carrying on and yowling for Terry. Just like we plan, I get him off in private and carry the rest of the deal out, so that finally he is mixing us a couple of drinks. I put the lousy pill in his glass when he wasn't looking, and then, before either of us takes a sip from our drinks, I manoover him out onto the moonlighted deck where we're alone with our drinks next to a lifeboat, gazing romantic-like over the rail at the harbor."

I gnashed my teeth again. "That makes it worse!" I cut in. "If you got that far and messed it up, that makes it a hundred times worse than before!"

"Listen, you lying louse!" Babs flashed back, eyes blazing. "*I* didn't mess nothing up! I did everything like you say I should. I have even got him out there, like I said, on the deck in the moonshine and all. He's got his glass in his hand, and in that glass is the fake pill, just like I have put it there."

"*Fake* pill!" I broke in indignantly. "Where do you get that *fake* pill business?"

"Because it don't work, that's how I get that fake pill business, you liar!" Babs shrilled.

"Listen," I snarled in seething rage, "if you used the pill I gave you, it wasn't fake. It was the pill that would make him your set-up for good!"

"Yeah, sure!" Babs laughed in harsh sarcasm. "It sure did. I am standing there in the moonshine with him and my back is to the rail and he is standing before me, raising his glass for his first sip. He says to wish him luck and happiness with that Marsh dame. He says we'll make a toast out of the drink to our future fren'ship. Then he lifts his glass inna long, gulpin' swallow of the stuff."

I forgot my rage long enough to blurt: "Then what?"

"Then he coughs a little, and looks up quickly," Babs went on. "But he don't catch my eye, even though I tried to catch his. He looks over my shoulder, staring, kind of, not even noticing me, his glims glued to something out in the harbor. 'My God!' he says suddenly, his voice real funny-like, 'She's the most beautiful creature in the world!' "

"He said that?" I bleated. "Terry Fortescue said that about you? Then what did you do, you bungling idiot?"

Babs' voice was strident. "He wasn't saying that about me!" she yelled. "You big jerk, he wasn't saying that about me at all. The damn fool was saying that about what he saw over my shoulder out there in the harbor moonlight."

"Well what in the hell did he see in the harbor?" I bellowed frantically.

BABS' lips went grim. "That's what I wondered. I turned around to look. There was nothing out there that he couldda been staring at but the Statue of Liberty!"

"The Statue of Liberty?" I gasped. "You mean he'd been staring at the Statue of Liberty and said 'she' was the most beautiful creature in the world?" I demanded.

"Nothing else but," Babs said in grim fury. "In other words, you lying faker, that pill didn't do anything at all other than make his mind wander. For he jest stared at the Statue of Liberty like I wasn't even there. And then he repeated that crazy talk about it being the most beautiful creature in the world. I tried like crazy to get

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his mind back on me, but I might as wella been in Asia. He didn't even know I was there. And then, when he started the crazy talk at the end, I ran off screaming mad and got back in the motorboat waiting alongside."

"Crazy talk?" I asked sickly. "You mean what he said about the most beautiful creature being the Statue of Liberty?"

"Kinda like that," Babs snapped. "Oney more so. He blabbed to hisself about how 'she'—meaning the Statue —was gonna be his oney girl, his oney sweetheart, his oney wife until 'she' was rescued from her defamers, or something like that."

I shook my head slowly from side to side. It had never ached more. For it was all clear now. All terribly clear. The Goddess of Liberty there in the harbor had been the first female to meet Fortescue's eyes when he'd swigged down the pill. And he'd fallen in love with the statue!

Babs was still shrilling on indignantly about what a louse and liar Steve Boswell was, and loudly demanding her twenty dollars back right then and there. But I was in no mood for explanations, or rebuttals. I leaned forward and told the driver to stop the cab. Then I got out, while Babs screeched indignantly from the cab that she wasn't going to get stuck with the bill.

It had started to rain, so she didn't get out and chase after me, for which I was faintly happy. The rain felt good on my aching head as I walked along the deserted sidestreet.

I could see the headlines in the papers of the following morning. I knew they'd feature the break-off of the Fortescue engagement. And of course they would double-spread his enlistment in the U. S. Armed Forces.

But no one would ever know the story behind the idle young rich boy's sudden carrying of the torch for an ideal called Liberty. Terry Fortescue himself wouldn't know, and neither would his jilted society sweetheart or Babs Cartier the little burlesque chorine, or Peter P. Paxton, who'd disappeared into nowhere.

Stephen B. Boswell would know, however. Oh, my yes, he'd know! He'd know and ache inside and out every time he thought in terms of the big dough he was never gonna have.

And Becky the scrubwoman—even though she wouldn't know—would be still babbling the theory that explained the thing most briefly. Babbling it in her own quaint way. I could just hear her.

"Nothing in the way of love stands," she'd say. . . .

THE END

THE BATTLE OF HUGE NUMBERS

You'll be dizzy when you try to add up these numbers!

IF you found yourself fascinated by large numbers, you would probably be interested in astronomy. You would probably spend most of your spare time trying to conceive a distance of 220,000 light years. You would probably ignore completely the earth bound animals about you—thinking that when it came to showing something big, they were at a complete loss. This is not true, and it will be the purpose of this article to prove this false—by showering the reader with numbers whose magnitude and implications are guaranteed to stun the average human mind.

Let us begin with a visit to an invisible world. All about us this invisible world exists. Its citizens infest our food, invade our bodies, decompose our dead. They are ever present: bathing in the fluids of our eyes, swimming in our very bloodstreams, and even eating us while we are still alive—too impatient to wait for us to die. Yet, they are not all villains. They help us make our cheese. They help us decompose our dead and in so doing give back to the earth the important

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chemicals needed by the living. I need give no more introduction. I have already betrayed who these citizens of the invisible world are. Yes, our friends and foes—the microbes. How small are they? Kendall computed that 37,000 typhoid fever germs, lying one atop the other, would rise to a height of a match stick, about two and a half inches. Also, three thousand of these same typhoid fever germs if laid out side by side would form a mass as thick as the match. According to Greaves, 125,000 Pfeiffer microbes laid end to end would span an inch. Greaves also figured that if you took a six foot man and magnified him in the proportion that it is necessary to magnify some microbes, this man would appear to be 6,000 feet tall and 500 feet across the shoulders. Berl ben Meyr figures that a bacterium 2 M long and 0.5 M wide (M is 1/1,000,000 of a meter—called a "micron") would need 15,700,000,000 more microbes like itself to fill a 1 millimeter cube—also that each one of these microbes would weigh .000,000,001,884 milligrams or 1/30,000 ounce. Promise to keep in mind the above weight of one microbe, and if you have any concept of what a large number really means—other than a "batch" of zeros—I will in turn promise to "floor you" with the next estimation. It is again estimated (by Berl ben Meyr) that if microbes increased without check, the progeny of one microbe in fifty-eight hours would number 281,500,000,000 and in 72 hours the weight of that lone microbe's descendants would be 74,178 tons. Think of the number of microbes needed to make up 74,178 tons, if one microbe weighed 1/30,000 of an ounce. That of course is only after 72 hours. What can we expect if all these microbes were allowed to reproduce at this rate for a year? Why, there would be no living room on this earth.

Fortunately for us, the microbes could never find enough food to increase at such a rate. Also, microbes—like any other animals who would tend to flood our earth—have enemies that are capable in most instances to control their number. We must realize that nature has worked out a perfect balancing system and we must never attempt to disrupt this system, if we wish to avoid chaos.

Let us look at some of our larger animal friends. What astounding facts can they offer us? The oyster may serve as a splendid example. It has been estimated (by John Y. Beaty) that one oyster sends forth so many eggs, that if all were to develop, the oyster would be capable of producing 6,600,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 offsprings. It is impossible for all these eggs to develop and most of these eggs will be made a meal of by the larger fish.

Just think what would happen if this were not the case—if each of these new oysters could live, and in turn produce this huge number of eggs when its egg laying season came. Why, the ocean would be no more than a giant oyster stew.

The star fish sees to it that the oyster will not crowd out the ocean itself. Each female starfish itself can produce two hundred million eggs a year and each of these eggs is a potential oyster eater. On the other hand, there are also many animals which can keep the starfish under control by eating most of its hundred million eggs. So goes the food chain of nature—I eat you—some one eats me—some one eats that some one that ate me. On and on goes this vicious circle, but in the end this confusion seems to work itself out and the life in our great seas is comparatively harmonious. Let us leave the water dwelling oysters and starfish and consider some of our land animals. Has the reader ever seen a tiny aphis (often called the plant louse). Those that have, can testify to its small size. In fact, the individual aphis weighs only about one-sixtieth as much as a grain of wheat. Yet—according to John Y. Beaty—*if* one female aphis could reproduce without any check, and *if* its offsprings all lived and reproduced in the normal way, there would be enough plant lice to completely cover the earth with their bodies. All having been born in one summer's time.

The reader of this article has probably seen a good many examples of a hardy appetite. How would you care to match this feat? It seems that the larva of the polyphemus moth—during the first two days after it hatches—eats 86,000 times its weight. Think of a man trying to outdo the moth larva and attempting to eat 86,000 times his own weight. Wow! That isn't all of the story. The same moth, while consuming this enormous quantity of food, actually grows 4,140 times its size. Don't forget that this all occurs within forty-eight hours after birth. Would forty-eight hour junior like to challenge baby moth to a pie-eating contest?

Let us now go from one extreme to another. In the last paragraph we have shown how hardy animal appetites can be. Let us now show what good fasters the animals can also be. Old Ghandi had better duck at this next fact. Cattle ticks can keep alive without food for as long a period as 1,800 days. Even the ever hungry fish can fast when the time comes to do so. The Chinook salmon, which lives in the Pacific Ocean and weighs about twenty-two pounds—can make an ocean trip of one thousand miles without touching food during the entire trip. This is still "chicken feed" if you care to go back to our invisible world of microbes. There is a case where the spore of a living microbe was actually found in coal deposits, and was brought back from its dormant spore stage. If the coal was laid down during the carboniferous period—when most of the earliest coal producing plants were formed—it could possibly be 361,000,000 years old. Think of what it means to have been thawed back to life after having been encased in coal—without food nor water—perhaps for a period of time as long as 361 million years.

I could go on and on relating more and more of these astonishing facts. I think I have proved my point. Don't you?

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THE LAST CASE OF

Jules' eyes widened in unbelieving horror as the sheet came away

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JULES de GRANJERQUE

by

John York Cabot

"Spirits are ze bunk!" said the famous little ghost-breaker. Was he mistaken...?

WE sat in my comfortable, book-lined study before the cheering warmth of the blazing hearth, blinds drawn against the fury of the storm outside. My little French friend, de Granjerque, smiled at the empty whisky-soda glass in his hand significantly.

"Eh bien, friend Throwbunk," he said musingly. "All good must have an end, *n'est-ce pas?"*

I took the hint, then his glass, measuring out another portion of whisky, squizzing soda to suit. I handed the glass back to him.

"Merci," he nodded.

"But as we were saying," I reminded him.

"Ahhh, yes. So we were!" Jules de Granjerque smiled. "About the minor fourteenth century poets, was it not?"

"No," I said patiently. "We were talking about your favorite topic, occultism, recall?"

"Oui, parbleu!" he exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "So we were! And what mighty pronouncement did I deliver, friend Throwbunk, *mon ami?"*

"You said," I told him patiently, "that supernatural evidences can never be visually witnessed by humans."

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"Ahh, *oui!*" de Granjerque exclaimed. "Of a certainty they cannot. Mind, friend Throwbunk, I do not completely disdain the possibility of a supernatural world beyond our own. *Non!* I am not saying that. However," he paused to take a long gulp from his glass, then continued, "I say it is impossible to believe the fakirs and quacks who maintain they have had any positive evidence of the being of a supernatural world—attend?"

I squirmed a trifle uncomfortably, trying to follow my brilliant little French friend. I had long been used to such deep pronouncements in our discussions, but it always made me somewhat uneasy to realize that, although I might not follow my little super-supernatural sleuth too closely, he was generally indubitably right in what he proclaimed.

"Then," I asked, "you most certainly do not believe in ghosts?"

De Granjerque smiled flashingly, touching the corners of his waxed moustache lightly. He chuckled, took another gulp from his whisky-soda, and put it down beside his elbow.

"Of a certainment, I do not believe in such things as ghosts, friend Throwbunk! Have I not proved in perhaps a hundred ways during our long association that we mortals cannot have any such silly actual evidences of occult powers around us? Have I not proved that, as far as we humans are concerned, such matters as supernatural powers and ghosts and the like, cannot exist?"

I sighed. "You have," I admitted.

"Of course I have!" Jules de Granjerque snorted. "In the Case of the Horned Satan, for example, did I not prove that the Horned Satan was nothing more or less than a hat-rack, with antlers?"

"That's right," I agreed nostalgically. That had been a case!

"Oui, but of course," said de Granjerque. He picked up his glass, emptied it with a gulp, and handed it to me hintingly. As I refilled it, de Granjerque went on reminiscently. "And in our celebrated Case of the Widow's Werewolf, did I not prove that the marks on the woman's throat were nothing but the result of the cleated shoe of a marathon runner who had gotten confused in his race and ran through her boudoir?"

"Yes," I admitted quickly. "Yes, you certainly did!"

LITTLE de Granjerque twisted the ends of his waxed moustache a trifle smugly and smiled. *"Oui!* It is always thus when I, Jules de Granjerque, accept a case involving what other foolish mortals fear to be occultism. Always, I am able to prove their fears are stupid, groundless. Always I, Jules de Granjerque, point their humble minds back to the path of reality and what you, my friend Throwbunk, call the sense of the horse."

"Horse sense," I corrected him mildly.

"Oui," said de Granjerque. "As I say, the sense of the horse!" I had his glass in my hand, and he snatched it from me, taking a deep gulp. He smacked his lips.

"Regard," he went on, "our almost forgotten Case of the Man Possessed. In that, did I not prove it was not Satan dwelling in the poor person who sought my aid? Did I not prove that all he was having was a bad case of what you call the burps?"

I had to agree that it had been so. Just burps.

Jules de Granjerque sighed. "It is so," he said. "Never, friend Throwbunk, have I failed to debunk stupid

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superstition."

Awed, I watched my little super-supernatural sleuth down his whisky-soda in a gulp. Then he planked it noisily at his elbow.

And at that instant, the telephone beside my study desk rang.

I rose.

"Regard!" de Granjerque halted me. I turned to see him holding out his empty glass.

"Wait until I get the phone," I said.

Jules de Granjerque's smiling mouth went into a pout. I turned away again and went over to the telephone. I took it from the cradle as it started to ring for the third time.

"Hello," I said, "Doctor Throwbunk speaking."

The voice, coming across the wire, was definitely agitated.

"*The* Doctor Throwbunk?" it demanded. "The friend and right hand man to the famous Jules de Granjerque?"

"That is right," I told my caller. "And to whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"Burton," said the voice. "Silas Burton, of Burton and Baden, real estate operators. I'm in the village, just a mile and a half from your place."

"What is the trouble, Mr. Burton?" I asked.

"I need your help," said the frantic voice of Silas Burton.

"I presumed as much," I said loftily. "However, I wish you'd be specific. What can we do for you?"

"You mean Jules de Granjerque is out there in your house now?"

I looked across that room at the little French friend. He was mixing his own drink this time.

"He is," I said impatiently. "Now please get to the point."

"You know the Masterson Mansion, 'bout a dozen miles from your place?" asked Silas Burton, the realty man.

"Naturally," I said testily, "I am acquainted with most of the dwellings of any size in this vicinity."

"It's been deserted for over a year, after we—my partner and I—bought it from the Masterson's last heir who didn't want to live there."

"I am also aware that it has been deserted more than a year," I told my caller. "Even if I wasn't aware that you and your realty partner had purchased the dwelling."

MY caller broke in. "Well just two weeks ago we rented it to a rich family who were coming out from the city to live in it over the summer months."

"And what has that," I asked with thin patience, "to do with us?"

"Well, this family was in the house only yesterday and the day before. Now they've all moved out, lock, stock and barrel," said Burton.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Because they say it—the building—is *haunted!*" said my caller.

I looked across the room again at de Granjerque, saying, almost involuntarily: "Haunted?"

Jules de Granjerque caught the word, his ears came up in points. He rose and started over to me swiftly.

"Yes, haunted," said Burton the realty man. "They walked out, broke their lease, and we've lost a lot of money. Now what I called about was—"

Jules de Granjerque was at my side and had taken the telephone from my hand.

"*Allo!*" he snapped curtly. "This is *the* Jules de Granjerque talking. Summarize everything you have told my colleague."

And then, while I stood there beside the little Frenchman, I faintly heard

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Burton's voice going over all he'd told to me. As he spoke, de Granjerque didn't interrupt, merely nodding impatiently to himself. Finally, my super-supernatural sleuth spoke.

"Voila! And you have called on me to help you, *n'est-ce pas?"*

De Granjerque nodded to himself at the other's answer.

"Of a certainty, there is no such thing as the haunted house," my little French colleague said after another moment. "Rest assured, poor *mon ami.* I, Jules de Granjerque, will ghost break that myth for you in the Masterson Mansion, personally!"

He smiled smugly at what must have been the other's tearfully pathetic thanks.

"Think nothing of it, *mon ami,"* he said then. "You and your partner will receive a whacking bill when I have done the job."

Burton spoke again, but I didn't catch anything more than the sound of the voice.

"I will rid you of any ghost fears before morning," de Granjerque boasted, then. "My colleague, Doctor Throwbunk, and I will go out to the deserted mansion immediately. We will spend the night there."

"But, de Granjerque!" I protested.

"Of a certainty, *mon ami,"* Jules de Granjerque was saying briskly into the phone. "You have nothing more to fear. I will report on the place by the coming morning. *Au revoir!"*

"Now, my friend—" I began, as de Granjerque hung up and turned to me.

"Non!" De Granjerque held out his hand, palm forward. "No protests, friend Throwbunk! I have made up my mind. Tonight, while the wind howls, the storm lashes, and the Masterson Mansion crouches bleakly deserted in the blackened night, I visit the place of ghosts!"

"But it's miserable weather," I said. "I don't feel—"

DE GRANJERQUE smiled pityingly on me, his sharp eyes twinkling.

"I do not command you to come with me, friend Throwbunk. If you do not desire to accompany me on this so-fascinating mission, I am quite prepared to venture it alone." He tweaked his moustache ends and strode to the table on which he'd carelessly tossed his Inverness cape when he'd come in. He picked it up, along with gloves and stick and opera hat.

"But it's about twelve miles to the Masterson Mansion," I said. "You aren't driving the sort of machine that can make some of those bog stretches you're bound to hit on those miserable side roads."

De Granjerque smiled faintly.

"Oui, mon ami Throwbunk," he said, "I am aware that I will need a larger vehicle to cover those bog roads without disaster. I am therefore taking the liberty of borrowing your limousine."

It was that last sentence that made up my mind. My limousine was my pride and joy, a master automobile. My little friend de Granjerque drove with all the wild recklessness of a gaucho. The thought of his sitting behind the wheel of that car—especially on a night such as this—was more than I could stand.

"Wait," I told him. "I'll be right with you."

THE howling storm outside was even worse than I had presumed. And it seemed as if it mounted in fury from the moment we left the warmth and comfort of my house and started through the rainswept courtyard leading to my garage.

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But my little friend de Granjerque seemed scarcely to notice the annoyance of the elements. Already he was far away in speculation on his forthcoming mission. His eyes had that glazed, thoughtful, staring fixedness that I had noticed on so many similar occasions before.

Once we were in the limousine and roaring out of the garage, de Granjerque settled back against the cushions and gazed blandly out the window.

"Do you have any ideas?" I asked him, as we swung out onto the highway.

He looked up at me sardonically. "*Parbleu,* Jules de Granjerque always has ideas!" he snorted.

"And what are some of the ideas you now have? I asked.

Little Jules de Granjerque assumed that smug, all-knowing expression I had come to respect.

"You will see, friend Throwbunk," he declared, "when I am fully ready to expound some of them. First, we must explore the Masterson Mansion."

"Of course you don't believe there are ghosts in the mansion, do you?" I asked.

"You heard what I told Monsieur, *non?*" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "but—"

De Granjerque waved his hand lightly, dismissing my foolish question contemptuously.

"And you recall our conversation before the telephone call?" he cut in.

I nodded. "Surely, of course I do. But what would make the frightened new tenants of the Masterson Mansion so convinced that ghosts haunted the place?"

"Physical evidences," de Granjerque smiled tolerantly. "The usual chain rattlings, floor creakings, and so forth. *Pouf!*" He snapped his fingers.

"You think some human agency is causing all this, then?" I asked. "I mean, the physical evidences which frightened the tenants of the old mansion into seeing ghosts?"

My friend de Granjerque looked secretively smug again, and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"My friend, Throwbunk," he reminded me, "we will see what is to be seen, *n'est-ce pas?*"

I nodded, glumly aware that my brilliant little colleague was going to conduct this super-supernatural investigation in much the same fashion as he had on all other occasions on which I'd been privileged to accompany him. I would have to wait for the complete story before he gave me any of it other than what became evident as he proceeded with the case.

I TURNED my attention back to the road—and just in time, since we were nearing the fork where we would have to leave the highway and take to the rain-bogged sideroads which would lead us to the old Masterson Mansion.

As I concentrated on peering through the rainswept darkness which our headlights did not quite defeat, I caught a glimpse of Jules de Granjerque quietly inspecting a Wembly-Vickers pistol which he'd taken from a holster inside his Inverness.

A chill swept me at the glint of that weapon's barrel in the faint light from the dashboard. A chill of premonition that told me my colleague was expecting more than a little trouble in the solution of this case.

"You are several hundred yards from the road fork, friend Throwbunk," de Granjerque declared calmly, continuing to inspect his gun.

I was more than a little startled by this remark. How the brilliant little de Granjerque could have known this

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when I, much more familiar with the surrounding country than he, was still uncertain as to when the fork would pop up, was more than I could imagine. But that was de Granjerque, the little man of amazing knowledge, unsuspected familiarity with every square foot of earth on the surface of the globe.

And then of course, the road fork loomed up precisely two hundred yards on. I slowed, turned the limousine left onto the bogged side roading. From the corner of my eye I could see de Granjerque still smiling smugly to himself.

But then, for the next few miles, I had little time to observe my friend. The going became infinitely nasty. Foot after foot was nothing more than mud buried beneath from fifteen to twenty inches of water. On more than seven occasions I felt certain that we would slide into mud mires to be bogged there eternally. But in each instance, when it seemed as if our tires were no longer getting traction, my friend de Granjerque would reach over wordlessly, grab the wheel with one hand, and give it a skillful jerk which would bring us out of danger.

He had, of course, placed his Wembly-Vickers back in its holster.

For the next five miles we carried over a gravel roadway stretch that was not quite as mired as the previous lanes, and I was beginning to hope that our troubles were almost over, inasmuch as we were now a scant three miles from the Masterson Mansion.

The storm had not abated in the slightest since our departure from my estate, and it seemed, with each mile further that we drove, as if the electrical fury in the blackened sky above was increasing with every minute.

I was surmising on the odd coincidence which seemed to make it an absolute necessity for the investigations of the brilliant little de Granjerque always to be launched on similar wildly stormswept nights. It was occurring to me that I couldn't think of a case but out of the many hundreds de Granjerque had solved which hadn't begun on a night in which the elements were berserk.

I was turning my head toward de Granjerque, about to comment on this singularly strange coincidence, when the steering wheel seemed suddenly to go wild in my grasp.

WE had left the gravel roadway stretch for one of mud, and in the transition the front right wheel had struck a submerged rock which had thrown the car into an erratic left skid.

It was the quick thinking brilliance of my friend, de Granjerque, leaning forward as he did to snap off the ignition, which saved us from going off the road completely.

Then the wheel in my hands was no longer spinning. The motor was dead, and we were stalled in the mud at a cross angle on the narrow road.

"Mon dieu!" my French friend exclaimed. "That was almost a close one, eh Throwbunk?"

"It was," I agreed, giving him a humbly grateful glance. "And you saved us considerable grief."

Jules de Granjerque nodded. "But of course I did," he admitted smugly. "Now let us get on, eh, Throwbunk?"

I nodded, flicking the ignition back on, and starting the limousine's powerful motor again.

But even as I put the machine in gear and released the clutch, the sensation of the futile spinning of the wheels in the mud mire was instantly apparent. Sickly, I realized that we were truly bogged.

I snapped off the ignition switch and

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turned to de Granjerque.

"It seems as if we are bogged," I observed.

My little French friend gave me a disapproving glance which clearly spoke pity and irritation at my ineptness.

"*Bien,*" said de Granjerque, "then at once un-bog us!"

I spread my hands helplessly.

"There are no planks convenient," I said. "Nor is there any hope of our getting a machine to tow us out of this mire."

De Granjerque gave me a sharp glance, then frowned. I sat there in the silence, watching the evidences that his brilliant mind was in action. The rain beat down on the hood and roof of our machine, a reminder of the nasty night just outside us.

But de Granjerque was thinking.

In that there was hope.

Moments passed. Lightning flashed somewhere in the forest to the right of us, and I thought I heard the crash of a great tree splintered by its might.

Sickly, I peeked out through the window at our surroundings. Mud was everywhere within a ten-yard radius of our machine. Deep, messy, clay mud. A person stepping into it would sink almost a foot above his ankles in the stuff.

"You are the larger of we two, friend Throwbunk," de Granjerque said at last.

I looked back from my contemplation of the ooze around our car. From the tone of the brilliant little Frenchman's voice it was clear that his keen mind had formed a plan of action.

"Yes?" I asked. Yes—go on!"

"So I will rock," said de Granjerque.

"Rock?" I asked, puzzled.

De Granjerque gave me a pitying look. "*Voila!*" he said. "Like so!"

I watched him wide-eyed as he suddenly began to rock back and forth in the seat as if it were an old fashioned rocking chair.

But I was still not quite able to follow the brilliant pattern of his thought.

"I still don't understand," I confessed humbly.

De Granjerque stopped rocking and gave me a withering glance.

He pointed to himself with a slim finger.

"I, de Granjerque, will rock, as you observed. You, friend Throwbunk, will get out and push!"

I nodded at the brilliance of the suggestion, and in the next instant became aware of the discomfort it meant for me. There was that slick clay mire everywhere around the car.

I opened my mouth in protest.

"Cease!" exclaimed de Granjerque. "It is the most scientific plan. I am small; you are large. I rock; you push. Brilliant, *n'est-ce pas?*"

I WAS forced to admit that my colleague, as always, was infinitely correct in his analysis of the situation. Shuddering, I steeled myself against what I knew to be coming, opened the door on my left, and stepped out into the storm and up beyond my ankles in mud.

It took all of several minutes for me to work my way around to the back of the car through that mire. And by that time, my friend de Granjerque had eased himself over into the position I had occupied behind the wheel.

As I took my position—ready for the difficult task of pushing—behind the limousine, de Granjerque started the motor once more.

By this time I was so thoroughly soaked by the deluge of rain, and stickily enmired in mud over my ankles, I felt certain there could be

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no more physical discomforts ahead for me.

But the carbon monoxide flood from the exhaust was something I hadn't considered. When de Granjerque started the motor, it almost overcame me.

When I had moved out of range of the exhaust and back into another position which would enable me to push against the machine, I caught a glimpse of de Granjerque through the rear vision mirror.

Both hands firm on the wheel of the car, he sat there rocking back and forth like a madman.

Guiltily, I realized that I was not doing my share, and so quickly began to exert the utmost of my strength in a pushing maneuver.

Minutes passed, while the motor of the car roared angrily and my little friend inside continued to rock industriously back and forth behind the wheel. My muscles, as I pressed groaningly against the rear of the machine, seemed tearing into ribbons. My face by now, in spite of the chill of the rain and the fury of the storm, was beaded with sweat streaks.

But we were making no progress.

I peered up again through the rear window of the limousine and saw de Granjerque still rocking madly back and forth. Ashamed at what was obviously my letting him down, I bent quickly back to my task.

More minutes passed, while the motor snarled and the rain beat down, and my friend rocked, and my muscles screamed the torment they were feeling.

And then, at last, success!

The car shot forward out of the bog with a suddenness that was lightning-like. Before I could regain my balance—I had been leaning far forward and pushing desperately against the rear of the machine—the car was off like a shot, and I was splashing nastily forward on my face into as messy a mud bog as I shall ever care to encounter again.

The sensation was hideous. The mud was colder, oozier, viler, than I had imagined anything could be. It went into my sleeves, down the front of my dinner shirt and, I must confess, into my mouth which I had opened in a shout of alarm.

By the time I picked myself up out of the ooze, I was undoubtedly almost beyond recognition.

But the car was on firmer terrain some twenty yards up ahead, and safely out of the mud.

The brilliance of my little friend had again gotten us out of a minor crisis, and for that I was humbly grateful.

SPITTING the mud from my mouth, I set out to catch up with the car. A minute later, and I was beside it, opening the door.

De Granjerque, still behind the wheel, looked at me quizzically, one eyebrow arched.

"Parbleu!" he exclaimed distastefully, as his eyes swept over my ghastly mud smeared appearance, "You were always a clumsy one, friend Throwbunk."

I opened my mouth to protest at what I sensed to be a certain unfairness in my colleague's comment, when he spoke up again.

"And why did you not push with more vigor much sooner?" he demanded. *"Mon dieu,* I am exhausted from rocking!"

Withholding any comment — for after all, it had been *his* brilliant strategy which took our machine from the mire—I stepped to the running board to resume my place in the car.

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But de Granjerque held up his hand sharply.

"Hold!" he exclaimed. "You surely do not intend to bring the filth of the pig-mud into this machine with you?"

"But," I began.

"Parbleu!" he declared emphatically. "It is unthinkable!" He put his hand on the door handle. "Remain on the running board, friend Throwbunk, and I shall drive us the rest of the way."

Perhaps de Granjerque sensed a certain reluctance on my part toward this suggestion, for he added:

"Regard, is it not true that you are completely filthy?"

I nodded.

"And is it not true that I am clean and dry?"

Again I nodded.

"Does it not strike you, friend Throwbunk, as somewhat unfair that you should want me to be dirtied by some of that filth, merely because you are completely coated by it?"

In spite of my selfish promptings to the contrary, I was forced to nod agreement to this indisputable logic.

"Bien," de Granjerque concluded, "now then is it not logical that you should ride on the running board for the remainder of the distance?"

There was, of course, no answer to this. My brilliant little French friend's analysis of the situation had again been keenly logical.

He slammed the door, rolling the window down an inch or so to permit me to hold on with my fingers. I stepped to the running board, found purchase with my hands, and we roared off.

As previously mentioned, de Granjerque drove an automobile in the manner of the Flying Dutchman piloting a ship through a storm. Indeed, the similarity between the two was brought even closer to me by the fact that we ourselves were racing madly through a deluge of rain and a minor monsoon of wind.

Naturally, wet as I was, and bemudded, our reckless speed added to the chill of the night for me, as the wind tore at my ooze-covered clothing and drove the dampness icily beneath my skin.

I had little chance to torment myself with this discomfort, however, for de Granjerque's mad driving, and the bounding, bouncing course of our car, forced me to concentrate entirely on keeping my connections with the machine. Naturally I dreaded falling off, since de Granjerque's displeasure at any such lack of balance would be sharply stated.

It was not necessary to inform de Granjerque as to any more directions concerning our destination. The road on which we now raced led directly to the Masterson Mansion.

And inside of three more minutes we approached the slight hill upon which the place stood.

THE mansion, a three storied affair, constructed in imitation of baronial castles one sees in cinemas, loomed bleak and forbidding against the sudden illumination of a jagged knife of lightning that rent the blackened skyline at that instant.

It was set back several hundred yards from the road along which we still traveled, and the gravel drive which led up the hill to it was banked on either side by closely planted poplar trees.

De Granjerque turned the car up the gravel road ascending to the mansion, just as a clap of thunder in the distance growled ominously at our temerity.

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Involuntarily, I shuddered. And then we were streaking up the hill road, around the bend in the middle of it, and roaring up before the very doors of the bleak old mansion itself.

The car stopped so suddenly that I was thrown from it to the ground, landing flat on my face for the second time that memorable evening.

De Granjerque must have leaped from the car with incredible agility. For I was still spitting the gravel from my mouth, and trying to rise to my feet, when I heard his footsteps moving to my side.

"Mon Dieu!" de Granjerque's amazed, disgusted voice came to me. "This is no time to rest, friend Throwbunk. Rise. We have work to do."

I clambered to my feet, my faltering explanation dying on my lips as he turned his back on me and marched up to the big front door of the place.

Suddenly a flashlight beam threw a circle of white against the thick oak and copper fastenings of the big door, and I realized that de Granjerque had produced the light from somewhere in the endless pockets hidden about his Inverness.

I scrambled after him, reaching the door just as he produced a heavy ring of keys from another fold in his cape.

"Hold!" de Granjerque exclaimed, thrusting the flashlight into my hand and setting about in a search for the right key to fit the old lock of the great door.

After a moment, de Granjerque selected a key from the batch, and was stepping forward to insert it in the lock when a sudden blast of wind sent the great door creaking inward on its ancient hinges.

De Granjerque looked up at me with one eyebrow lifted.

"Parbleu!" he exclaimed. "It is just as I thought. Open."

I handed him the flashlight, and he stepped boldly forward, pushing the door back as we crossed the threshold. The beam of his flash flooded into the darkened room lying before us, revealing a balcony directly ahead and above us, and a twin staircase of marble on either side leading up to it.

We stood in an extremely large hallway.

"Close the door, friend Throwbunk," de Granjerque commanded.

I had scarcely done so, when a *click* sounded, and I turned back to find the entire great hallway illuminated, and a smiling de Granjerque standing beside a wall switch.

"Parbleu," he declared. "I thought the electricity would yet be in order, since Monsieur Burton's tenants moved out but recently."

I CONFESS that the presence of light in the room of this deserted mansion made me feel considerably more comfortable. I sighed my relief.

"Eh bien," de Granjerque said, "we must now begin our search for the ghosts or ghost who are present in this so comfortable dwelling."

"Where," I managed, "do you intend to start?"

De Granjerque smiled a superior sort of smile.

"Parbleu, friend Throwbunk," he said. "Sometimes you talk like a dull fellow. Why, at the bottom, of course."

"You mean in the cellars?"

"But of course," de Granjerque answered. "Come. Let us find our way to them."

I followed him across the hall as, disdaining the stairs leading to the balcony and second floor, he marched toward another room directly ahead of us.

There was a narrow sort of hallway leading from the great hall to that

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room directly ahead, and as we passed through it the darkness grew heavier, so that de Granjerque again snapped on his flashlight.

The beam it threw ahead revealed a large living room.

"Voila!" my friend exclaimed. "Home-like."

I confess, I was unable to agree with his sentiment. The vast living room in the play of his flash looked anything but invitingly home-like. The huge, covered furniture looked positively eerie, and the gaping black mouth of the great fireplace in the center of the room reminded one of nothing more than the jaws of some crouching ebon monster.

"De Granjerque," I said as unfalteringly as I could, "why must we start in the cellars? I think the upper floors would be—"

He cut me off.

"The horse's sense decides we should begin at the bottom, *n'est-ce pas?"*

"Well," I began dubiously.

"But of course!" de Granjerque declared emphatically. A man of iron nerves, de Granjerque. He knew no fear.

De Granjerque was stumbling about in the darkness, searching for the wall switch which would illuminate the living room. I turned to gaze back at the now seemingly distant illuminated hallway we had left—*when the lights in that hallway snapped off!*

"De Granjerque!" I choked.

"Bien?" he exclaimed, turning toward me. And then he saw the darkness of the hallway we'd left lighted.

"Voila!" he hissed. "It begins!"

And at that moment, as if waiting for de Granjerque's words, it did begin. A low, weird, human wailing. Softly at first, faintly audible, then louder. A ghostly, ghastly hideously spine-chilling sound—the howling of a damned soul from the ebon pits of hell!

"De Granjerque!" I chattered. "Do you hea—"

"Hush!" my friend cut me off. "We must learn from whence it comes!"

I fell silent, and the eerie, moaning, ghastly wail rose even more shrilly through the darkness. To make matters worse, my friend had switched off his flash and we stood there in total darkness.

I CONFESS, I wanted to cry out in terror. But the calm, cool, indomitable courage of my colleague, Jules de Granjerque, shamed me into a synthetic bravery.

And then the wailing stopped as abruptly as it had started.

There wasn't a sound, now, inside that house. And the crashing of thunder outside was suddenly more frightening than silence.

"Parbleu!" de Granjerque suddenly exclaimed softly. "That wail did not come from the cellars. It was on this floor, friend Throwbunk, or the one above us!"

I was about to speak, when another sound began—*the rattling of chains.*

"Again!" de Granjerque hissed. I could fancy him cocking his head sideways in the blackness, straining to follow that sound and determine from whence it came.

The chains had stopped rattling now, but the sound of their being dragged slowly across a floor replaced the other noise. Then there was abrupt silence again.

"Ahhhh," de Granjerque sighed, and I knew he'd determined from where that sound had come.

"Where?" I gasped.

"Directly above. Second floor," de Granjerque hissed.

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"But what about the lights that went off in the hall?" I whispered. "How?"

I could sense de Granjerque shrugging fearlessly in the darkness.

"Main switch. Electrical storm, perhaps. It does not matter. Our ghost is on the floor above. Come!"

I felt a sudden instant of panic, and envy for the cool courage of de Granjerque. He stepped past me in the darkness, and the beam of his flash suddenly snapped on again, illuminating part of the hall through which we passed a few moments before.

"But—" I began.

De Granjerque paused, turning back to me.

"Or would you prefer to wait down here alone, while I investigate, friend Throwbunk?"

"No. No. Not at all," I assured him.

We went through the narrow hall back into the great hallway. The beam of de Granjerque's flash went immediately to the wall switch by which he'd illuminated this hall when we'd entered it.

"*Voila!*" de Granjerque exclaimed. "The switch was thrown back to *off* again!" He chuckled. "That explains the sudden darkness. Now to find the ghost who snapped off the lights!"

He started around to the wide marble staircase on the right, and I was at his heels. But we scarcely reached the foot of the stairs before IT suddenly appeared atop the staircase.

The ghost!

It was white, rippling, and indistinct in the darkness as it hovered there directly above us for the first instant. Then it emitted a shrill, blood-chilling moan which left me utterly paralyzed.

"Stand!" little de Granjerque's voice shouted commandingly. And at that instant he brought his flashlight into focus on the thing, bathing it in a blazing circle of white.

"Stand!" his voice repeated coolly again. "I have my gun trained right on your heart, son of a camel, and I shall most certainly shoot if you dare move an inch!"

I WAS blinking at the ghost, terrified yet, but bewildered by de Granjerque's courageous challenge. It was a huge thing, I saw now, and it was sheeted, completely enshrouded in white, with two black holes for eyes.

"The light, friend Throwbunk!" de Granjerque's words brought me out of my trance. "Find the wall switch and throw on the light!"

Stumblingly, I turned and groped toward the wall for the light switch which would illuminate the hallway, and hence our ghost at the top of the stairs. It seemed an eternity before my fumbling fingers found that switch. But at last there was a *click* and the big hallway was again bathed in light.

I swung around to face the staircase again. De Granjerque still stood at the bottom, and the ghost at the top. He—de Granjerque—had his Wembly-Vickers in his hand, and it was trained unerringly on the figure atop the staircase.

"Do not move, *mon ami!*" de Granjerque said contemptuously. "For if you do, I shall most certainly put a thousand more holes in that bedsheet!"

"Bedsheet?" the word came from me involuntarily.

Smiling, without turning his head, de Granjerque spoke to me.

"*Oui,* friend Throwbunk, bedsheet. Our ghost is a poor parody of a spectre. His imagination is limited to the standard tricks one sees in cinemas. Wailings, chain rattlings, *pouf!*" he said contemptuously. "You see a large human being cowering beneath a bedsheet, playing ghost to frighten people

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away from here. I am tempted to shoot the bedsheet full of holes, at that!"

And then our "ghost" beneath the sheet spoke.

"Don't, Mister," it whimpered in a husky baritone. "Please don't shoot! I'll clear outta here. I'll scram. I promise. I won't bother nobody around dis neck of the woods no more!"

The sound of the human voice coming from beneath that bedsheet was suddenly ridiculous.

"Why, *mon* gravel-throated hulk, did you choose to scare people from this house?" de Granjerque demanded coolly.

"I been hiding out here. Over six months. Nobody to bother me. I landed here by accident when the state cops was on me tail. I'd pulled a job, and caught a couple of bullets in me chest for me trouble. I was too weak to lam outta the state like I planned," our "ghost" whined.

"So?" de Granjerque said coolly. "Please continue."

"Well, like I said. I was bleedin', see? I was weak. The state cops was on me tail. I found this deserted joint. It was poifect. I stumbled into the place by accident. For days an' nights I was deleerious, see? Still bleedin'. But the cops couldn't find me. Then, all of a sudden like, me powers of recooperation come through and I'm well again, strong enough to move around a little. I begin to realize I kin have the whole place to meself fer as long as I like. I kin wait until the trail on me tail is cold, see? I kin hide out until they stop lookin' fer me, see?"

"*Parbleu!*" de Granjerque exclaimed. "I see! Proceed!"

"I fix things up cozy fer meself. I go into the village now and then an' steal food. Nobody sees me, see?" our "ghost" went on. "I begin to realize people might get suspicious kind of if they see lights now and then in a joint that's supposed to be deserted. I know I gotta have sumpin to scare 'em away. So I figures out the ghost gag, see? I puts on a bedsheet anytime anyone noses around the joint. It works fine, and I'm not bothered none."

"Until," de Granjerque broke in, "the Burton realty company rented this mansion to some people from the city, eh?"

"Yeah," our 'ghost' answered. "Then I gotta do the ghost gag in earnest. But it was a snap. I drive 'em out in no time and I figure I'm safe again for a while. But then you come out tonight and refuse to be scared!"

OUR "ghost" ended this last with a bitter whine. De Granjerque merely smiled coldly.

"Jules de Granjerque is not easily fooled or frightened, *mon ami*," my colleague said contemptuously. "You found that out to your sorrow."

The "ghost's" voice took on a supplicating note.

"You ain't gonna turn me over to the state cops, are yuh?" the sheeted figure asked.

De Granjerque hesitated an instant, then smiled.

"No, *mon ami*," he declared. "Law will triumph. You will be caught. But I am going to give you just one minute to get out of this house, and another five minute start before I call the state police."

"T'anks!" the bedsheeted figure exclaimed gratefully. And then our "ghost" started rapidly down the stairs, sheet and all still around him.

As the bedsheeted figure stumbled past him and started toward the door, de Granjerque turned smilingly to me. He wore that infinitely superior smirk which had always characterized him on the solution of a case.

"*Voila!*" de Granjerque exclaimed,

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pointing to the hurrying, bedsheeted figure. "There, friend Throwbunk, is an example of what we were discussing earlier this evening. A very human motivation for that which superstitious and easily frightened humans might idiotically believe to be supernatural."

I could only gaze at my brilliant friend in open-mouthed admiration.

Our "ghost" had paused at the door.

De Granjerque raised his Wembly-Vickers significantly.

"One minute, Monsieur," he said reindingly, "is the time I gave you to leave here. In five more minutes, after you have your start, I shall call the state police!"

"I just wanted to say t'anks again," declared the gravel-throated baritone of the bedsheeted figure.

"Your progress in fleeing the police will be somewhat hampered by that bedsheet, Monsieur," de Granjerque told him dryly.

"Oh, cheeze. I almost fergot!" exclaimed the bedsheeted fugitive. "T'anks again fer reminding me."

Then suddenly the bedsheet was whipped up and off and dropped to the floor, *revealing nothing but an incredible, terrifying gray wraith beneath it! A gray wraith that had the vague, wavering shape of a huge ghost of a man!*

"Well, so long, and t'anks again," boomed the gravel-throated baritone of the gray wraith. And then it opened the door and slipped swiftly out into the stormswept darkness of the night. . . .

I NEED no further explanation as to why that was Jules de Granjerque's last case, I think. Nor explanation for the fact that my once brilliant little colleague now sits open-mouthed in a madhouse, saying again and again "*Mon dieu,* he did not *know* he was a ghost!"

I try to be kind to the shell of de Granjerque. I visit him at least once a week, when I am allowed out of my room directly across from his. . . .

THE END

Interesting BUG TALES

CERTAIN bugs possess legs which resemble oars. They propel themselves through the water with a rowing movement, therefore they are called the Boatmen.

Another interesting bug is the backswimmer. This bug also has oar-shaped legs. They are larger than those of the above mentioned bug and are noted for the fact that they swim upsidedown on their backs.

The perfume bug is a water bug, which when captured emits a white fluid which in the larger types has a pleasant aroma; in the smaller species the white fluid has a very offensive odor and this serves to prevent their being eaten by the captor.

Along this line is the fact that the monarch butterfly when captured exudes a bitter substance. When this is tasted by their captors—which are usually dogs, cats, or rabbits, these animals drop the bug hastily and hence, the monarch is spared capture and death.

The Viceroy, another butterfly, has successfully mimicked the Monarch and derives protection from the fact that its skin resembles that of the Monarch.

The whirligigs are a type of bug noted for the zig-zag rapid manner with which they move through the water. They are named whirligigs because the motion which they cause the water to make resembles a whirl-pool.

Of all the interesting bugs, perhaps none is so interesting as the glow-worm. This insect, whose tail-light has excited so much curiosity is possessed of a powerful poisonous weapon; powerful enough to kill a snail, that is. This weapon, like a blow gun dart, poisons the victim only to the point of rendering it unconscious; the victim is then eaten. The glow-worm has another interesting organ, one which enables it to perch in precarious positions. It is a sticky organ, near the tail. The tail-light functions in the same way that a fire burns or better still, in the manner that our bodies burn sugar. The action is best described as "slow burning" controlled by materials within the light and the amount of oxygen let into the pores. The tail-light is used by the females to attract males during the mating season. Since females are wingless, this is the only way of attracting the males.

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VIGNETTES OF FAMOUS SCIENTISTS

By ALEXANDER BLADE

Faraday

He was the most brilliant electrical experimenter of all time.

MICHAEL FARADAY, the distinguished English chemist and physicist, was born in London, on September 22, 1791. He was of Irish descent—his parents having migrated from Yorkshire to London, where his father worked as a blacksmith. Faraday himself was apprenticed into the book-binding trade. He devoted his leisure time to science and, among other things, made experiments with an electrical machine of his own construction.

In 1812 he was able to attend the lectures of Sir Humphry Davy, then at the zenith of his fame. At the close of the Davy course, young Faraday ventured to send to him the notes he had made during their delivery, with a modest expression of his desire to be employed in some intellectual pursuit. Davy was so impressed that he engaged him as his assistant at the Royal Institution of Great Britain, and later took him to the Continent as assistant and amanuensis.

On their return to London, Davy explained his plans for making some experiments which ultimately concluded with the liquefaction of certain gases by pressure. Here Faraday showed that extraordinary power and ingenuity which resulted in so many important discoveries and made his name familiar to every student of physics. He was so highly commended that in 1824 he was elected a member of the Royal Society and in the following year was appointed director of the Royal Institution, where later, upon the untimely death of Davy, he was promoted to his post as professor of chemistry, which in those days included the young but very lusty science of electricity. In 1835 he was granted a life pension of £300, and a home in Hampton Court for his residence and laboratory, and a year later he became the scientific adviser to Trinity House, a government organization, charged mainly with the erection and maintenance of lighthouses on the dangerous coasts of the British Isles. He died at Hampton Court on August 25, 1867.

Faraday's original discoveries and inventions were numerous and highly valuable. Most of them were in the domain of electricity and magnetism. His first important discovery was the revolution of a magnetic needle around an electric current in 1821. In 1831 came his discovery of electromagnetic induction, or the phenomenon by which a body having magnetic or electric properties calls forth similar capacities in a neighboring body without direct contact. Following this came the discovery of the action of one current on another, when the deflection was observed as before, and also when a magnet was inserted or withdrawn in a coil of wire. These discoveries naturally furnished the foundation for the development of magneto and dynamo machines and other inventions of importance. Faraday's researches in electrolysis are also of great value, and to him is due the discovery that the amount of liquid decomposed is proportionate to the current passing through the solution, and that equal quantities of electricity decompose equivalent amounts of different electrolytes.

To him we owe the useful terms "anode" and "cathode" and the phrase "lines of force," which he employed in his theory of the phenomena of electrostatic and electromagnetic induction. His studies and investigation of dia- and para-magnetism were of the greatest importance, leading him to the conclusion, now fully accepted, that all varieties of matter are influenced as universally—either attracted or repelled—by the magnetic force, as by the force of gravitation, yet not invariably, or even usually, to the same degree.

In chemistry, also, where most of Faraday's early work was done, many important discoveries are to be recorded, including a number of new chemical compounds. Of these perhaps the most important is an investigation on new compounds of carbon and hydrogen, inasmuch as it included the discovery of benzol, which is the basis of aniline dyes. He also carried on a number of experiments looking to the production of optical glass with unusual power of refraction.

Faraday was one of the most brilliant experimentalists that science has ever known, and to him credit must be given for much that electricity has accomplished. He was the author of numerous scientific monographs, and the complete and accurate record of his laboratory work as given in those published between 1835 and 1859, under the title of "Experimental Researches in Electricity" furnished a basis for the mathematical and theoretical conclusions on the subject of light, which made famous the name of James Clerke-Maxwell.

In recognition of his numerous and important contributions to the advance of the science of electricity, particularly in the matter of electrical condensation, his name shortened to "farad" has been internationally adopted to represent the "practical unit of electrical capacity."

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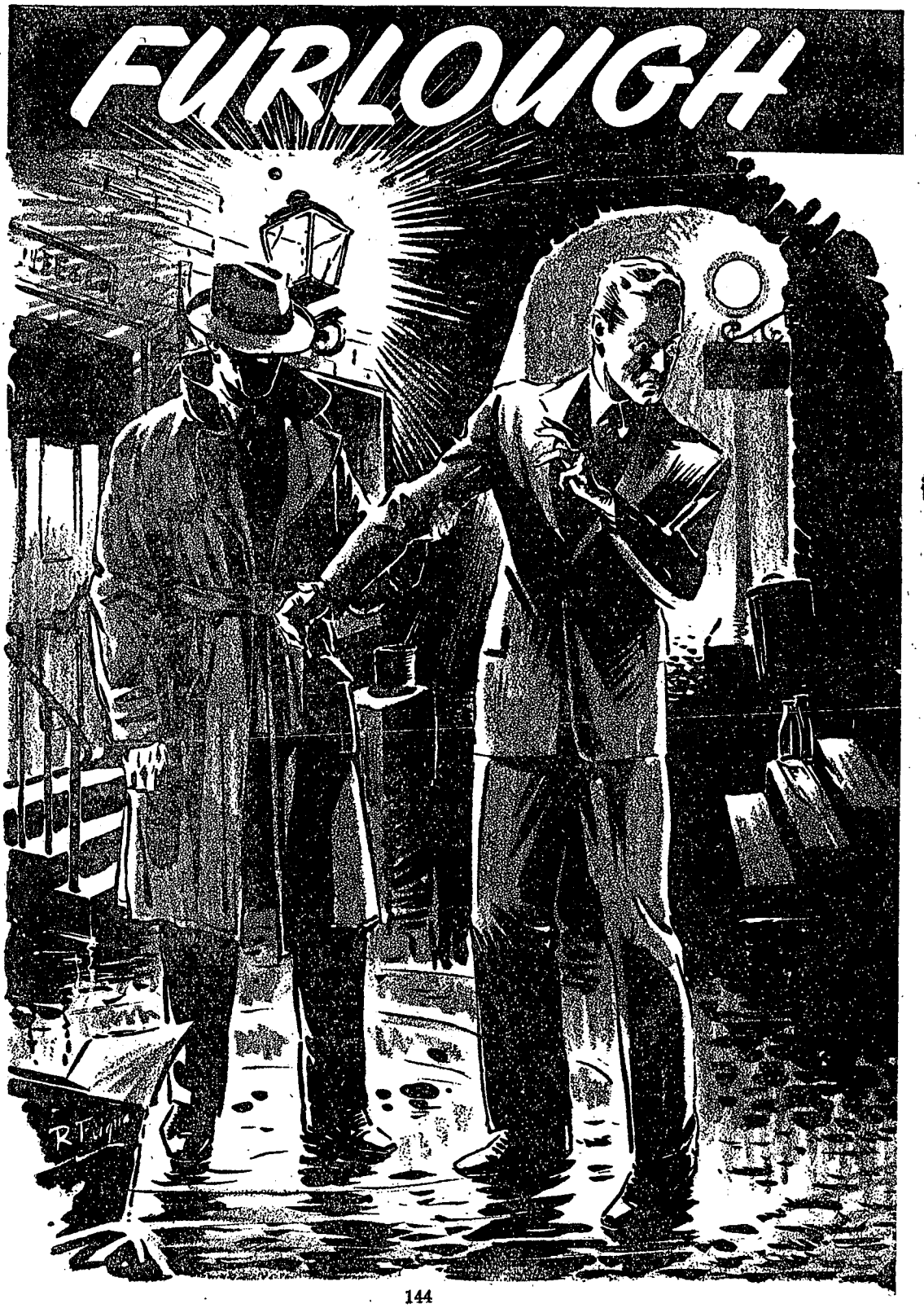

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from ETERNITY

By DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN

Gentry died because he gambled. Yet his gambling gave him a chance to live again

BIG, wide-shouldered, dark-haired Mike Gentry put his highball down carelessly on the glistening surface of the expensive and highly polished dresser, and leaned forward to adjust his black bow tie in the dresser mirror.

A cigarette dangled from Gentry's wide, unsmiling mouth, and his dark eyes, under thick black brows, stared unwinkingly, expressionlessly back at his mirrored reflection as he completed the irksome straightening process.

Behind Gentry, busily brushing invisible specks from the smooth lapels of his employer's rich, well-tailored, double-breasted dinner jacket, Joey Orlando, his combination valet and bodyguard, waited patiently.

Mike Gentry paused, surveyed the tie, picked up the highball glass, drained the remaining contents, placed it back on the dresser, and extended his arms casually as his valet-body-

With shocked incredulity he recognized the body in the alley mud as his own!

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guard moved up with the dinner jacket and assisted him on with it.

"You know what, Mike?" Joey Orlando said as Gentry buttoned the coat.

"If it has anything to do with that bug in your bean—" Mike Gentry began.

"I think you'd better pack a rod tonight, anyhow, Mike," Joey Orlando said quickly, pleadingly. "If only as a favor to me, huh?"

Mike Gentry sighed patiently, a half smile touching his wide mouth.

"Supposing we forget that stuff, Joey," he said.

"But, Mike," Joey Orlando squeaked desperately, "I got a hunch that something's gonna—"

Gentry cut off his valet.

"Hunches are for suckers, Joey," he said quietly. "You ought to know that by now. The smart guy plays the odds."

"But supposing—" Joey began.

"Supposing what?" Mike Gentry asked, removing his cigarette and flicking it unerringly out of an open window.

"Something happens," Joey said. "Supposing something happens?"

"Happens where?" Gentry asked amusedly.

"Why, anywhere," Joey protested. "At the supper club, or on the way from there to the game, or, even more likely, on the way back from the game in the early ayem."

"It won't," Mike Gentry said. He turned, crossing the bedroom of his luxurious suite, glancing briefly at his watch as he did so. "You call for the car?" he asked.

Joey Orlando, following behind his employer, rubbed his thin, long jaw worriedly. He was short, bald, wiry, with a face like a horse.

"Yeah I got it waiting downstairs," he said.

"Unless you want to use it tonight yourself," Gentry said, "tell them to send it back to the garage. It's a nice night and I got plenty of time. I think I'll walk."

"Boss!" Joey protested. "Not tonight. Not when I got this bad hunch!"

A flicker of impatience touched Gentry's dark eyes.

"You heard me," he said quietly.

MUTTERING under his breath, Joey Orlando nodded and went in search of his employer's coat and hat. When he came back into the living room, where Gentry now stood by the door lighting a fresh cigarette, Joey looked almost sullen.

"Here y'are, Mike," Joey muttered, holding out the coat.

Gentry slipped into it, took his hat, and with his hand on the door paused a moment to grin at his valet-bodyguard.

"Take it easy, Joey," Gentry said, and with an ungloved hand he reached out and rubbed Joey's bald forehead briskly. "Take it easy and I'll be back in the morning with fifty grand."

"You take it easy, Mike," Joey begged huskily. "I don't know when I've ever had such a screwy feeling about—"

"Sure," Gentry agreed. "Sure. I know. But never forget. Hunches are for suckers—the smart guy plays the odds."

IN THE elevator, on the way down from his thirty-fifth floor suite, Mike Gentry thought smilingly about Joey Orlando and his hunches. A good guy, Joey. Loyal, honest—though not too swift mentally. Gentry had picked Joey up outside a race track in Europe in 1930. As another American—Joey, a Brooklyn lad, had been riding horses for a French stable until discharged—

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Gentry had taken pity on the little ex-jockey and staked him to a meal, then a ticket back to the United States. Joey had just seemed to be impossible to shake after that, and when Mike Gentry docked in New York, Joey'd wrangled himself the position he held even now.

They'd seen a lot of the world together after that. Cannes, Monte Carlo, London, Paris, Rome, everywhere and anywhere that big-time gamblers roamed, Mike Gentry had taken Joey Orlando along with him. In London once, when they'd really hit rock bottom, Joey had stuck by—to the extent of turning over every penny of the money he'd saved from his salary so that Gentry could stake it on a comeback session.

But Joey had picked himself a terrible lifetime job, inasmuch as he was such a constant worrier. Gambling and worry didn't mix well; and after ten years with Gentry, Joey's bald brow resembled a well-furrowed field from the worry he'd put in over his employer's fortunes.

Mike Gentry smiled. Tonight, unfortunately, would add another furrow to Joey's forehead.

In the lobby Gentry smiled and nodded to several building employees, slipped a ten-dollar bill into the palm of the beaming doorman as he stepped into the street.

The doorman grinned happily, staring at the bill in his hand. Then he touched his cap, looking up.

"Good luck tonight, Mistah Gentry, suh!"

Gentry nodded briefly and started along the street through the pleasantly brisk autumn air. It was only four blocks from his apartment to the Panther Club, where he was to meet Margo Drusane for supper, and along the brightly lighted thoroughfare when Gentry turned uptown two blocks from the place, he smiled inwardly at the attention given him by traffic policemen, small-time bookies, supper club crowds, and the never-ending stream of big and little shots coming to life along the brightly lighted avenue with the twinkling on of each flashing bulb.

This was a world apart from the world of the daytime. This was Gentry's world. The world he'd found himself in when just a kid shining shoes and peddling papers a long time ago. A world of bright lights, blaring bands, roaring traffic, hustling crowds, actors, hoodlums, hoofers, gamblers, small fry wanting to be big, and big fry wanting to be bigger.

Mike Gentry waved amiably to those who had the temerity to speak to him, and grinned cynically at the half-whispered, awed remarks that followed him from the lips of those who envied.

"That's Gentry. Yeah, The Gentry, no less. Mike Gentry . . . the big shot gambler. . . . He's gonna play tonight. . . . How do I know? Doncha see the white carnation in his lapel? That means he's gonna play tonight. . . . Boy! What a game that'll probably be! . . . Hunnert, two hunnert tousand bucks'll probably change hands before morning. . . . Betcha Gentry gets mosta it. . . ."

Mike Gentry walked on, feeling the eyes that followed, the envy that followed, and smiled still more cynically inside. . . .

CHAPTER II

"Pleased—Mr. Gentry"

THE Panther Club, one of the swankiest, most outrageously expensive night spots in the big town, rivaled a Hollywood director's conception of a

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lavish supper club and then some.

The doormen—there were three of them for each succeeding entranceway through which the customers passed—looked like nothing less than major generals before Buckingham Palace. If you entered the Panther Club with anything less than a nationally recognized reputation or a six-inch bankroll the chances were that you wouldn't get past the cold scrutiny of the second doorman. But if you possessed either the prestige or the bankroll, your welcome was fawning indeed.

Mike Gentry had both the reputation and the bankroll, and in addition to that was on excellent terms with Curtis Frazier, owner and proprietor of the establishment. But four years previously Mike Gentry had saved Frazier from financial ruin, given him enough money to reopen the Panther Club on its now magnificent scale. Of course, at that time, Curtis Frazier had been Cushy Francesco. He had changed his name to meet the demands of the ultra swank club he operated.

Gentry passed through the gauntlet of the three widely beaming doormen, onto the rich, deep carpeting of the foyer, and gave his hat and coat over to a beautiful young lady in an exquisite evening gown who, it seemed, was merely the hat check girl, Daisy.

"Glad to have you tonight, Mr. Gentry," Daisy paraphrased the greeting of the three doormen, adding a smile and wide-eyed innuendo which, of course, could not be equaled by the greedy grins of the three major generals at the portals.

Off to the left of the foyer, Gentry heard the subtle show tune melodies of the excellent orchestra which was part of the gilt surroundings. In the sumptuous dining room people were laughing and dancing, the clink of glasses and the slither of silver mingling with the sounds of music and voices.

Gentry looked at his watch, then to the right of the foyer where the ivory and gold decoration of a lush bar and cocktail lounge was visible. It, too, was already fairly well crowded with dinner-clothed guests.

Gentry went into the bar, taking a stool in the right hand corner, and ordered a Martini.

The orchestra was still playing in the dining room, but much of the noise of voices and dining had ceased, leaving only the soft sliding of feet and the soothing strains of the melody. Above this, Gentry heard the sudden beginning of a torchy ballad sung in a low, vibrant, throatily feminine voice.

That would be Margo Drusane on the bandstand, singing her last number for this show. Margo Drusane, young, blonde, utterly beautiful, who was, in a sense Mike Gentry's fiancée. Gentry and Margo had been linked in the big-time gossip columns as "an item" for over a year now. A year in which, for the first time since he could recall, there had been only one woman in Gentry's life. Margo, of course, being that woman.

Mike Gentry sipped his Martini reflectively and listened through to the end of the ballad. And as the applause was still sounding from the diners, Gentry rose, moved away from the bar and started for the dining room.

MARGO was waiting for him at their special table when he came up to it. Waiting and smiling brightly, beautifully, as he made his way across the richly appointed dining room.

"Hello, Mike," she smiled, catching his hand and squeezing it as he bent and brushed a kiss across her cheek.

"How are you, baby?" Mike asked, seating himself.

"Never felt better," Margo said.

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"Missed you today. Feel lucky tonight, darling?"

Gentry shrugged. "I never count on lucky, baby. You know that. It's the—"

Margo smiled wryly, mockingly holding up one hand.

"I know, Mike," she laughed. "I've heard it often enough to know it by now. It's the odds, not luck or chance."

"That's right, baby," Gentry grinned. He patted his breast pocket, frowned slightly. "Got a cigarette? I left my case at the apartment."

Margo opened her small evening bag, poked inside with a small, delicately beautiful finger, shook her head.

"Not a one, honey," she said.

Gentry turned slightly, signaling to the headwaiter with two fingers to his lips, turned back to Margo.

"Frazier around right now?" he asked.

Margo shook her head. "Don't think so. Haven't seen him yet tonight. Why?"

Gentry shrugged. "Just wanted to talk to him. He's playing tonight, you know."

"Frazier?" Margo's eyebrows went up in surprise.

Gentry nodded. "So I understand. He ought to stick to his own trade. There'll be a lot of tough gamblers there tonight, and the stakes are going to skyrocket, I've a hunch. If he runs a bad streak tonight, he might end up with one of those gorillas owning the Panther Club as his security. I don't like it. I staked him to this place and it's been doing plenty well for him. It doesn't look so smart for him to start stepping into a line where he might get hurt."

Margo Drusane smiled. "He can take care of himself, Mike. Don't worry about it."

Again Gentry shrugged. "I don't give a damn if he loses his shirt. But he's the younger brother of a guy who used to be my pal—Johnny Francesco. That's the only reason I ever helped Frazier, anyway, you know."

"He's smart," Margo said reassuringly.

Gentry shook his head. "He doesn't seem to be."

Margo put her hand on Gentry's.

"Do we have to talk about that, Mike?" she smiled. "Here I am starving and almost dying of thirst, and you haven't even—"

Suddenly Gentry grinned an apology. "Sorry, kid. I almost forgot."

He turned, beckoned to a waiter, who hurried to their table.

"Two Martinis," Gentry said. "We'll order when you bring them."

"Yes, *sir*, Mr. Gentry," the waiter beamed.

"Cigarettes, Mr. Gentry?" a voice said a moment after the waiter had gone.

MIKE GENTRY looked up into the smiling, eager, pretty face of young, redheaded Gloria Allen, one of the Panther Club's cigarette girls. Her lovely figure was almost too daringly revealed in the scanty blue costume in which the management uniformed her.

Gentry smiled.

"My regular brand, Gloria. Two boxes, please."

He took the cigarettes from her, noticing with some surprise that her hand trembled slightly. Then he dropped a bill on her tray and smiled dismissal. Falteringly, the girl returned his smile, and with cheeks flushed, hurried away.

Mike Gentry looked his surprise at Margo.

"What do you suppose was eating the kid?" he asked.

Margo smiled. "You'd never believe it, Mike. It's simply too, too funny.

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Poor little thing."

"Huh?" Gentry demanded. "What are you talking about?"

Margo made a mock serious expression. "If you promise not to throw me overboard, Mike, I'll tell you. The little goof is having a terrific crush over you. Everyone of the girls employed in the club knows it by now."

"On me?" Gentry asked. "She's carrying a torch for me?"

Margo laughed throatily, nodding.

"It's true, darling. You'd better watch out. The little redheaded minx has her claws all set for Mike Gentry—believe it or not!"

Mike Gentry's expression was unfathomable.

"I'll be damned," he said softly. "Poor little kid."

The laughter left Margo's expression.

"Hardly a poor little kid, Mike," she said reprovingly. "Not in that get-up. Why, I could carry her costume in the back of my locket."

"She didn't design the get-up," Mike said. "And I don't think she'd want that job in this gilt-covered flea trap if she could get another."

Margo looked at him in annoyance.

"Now, Mike," she said. "You're talking like something that should be done to a background of *Hearts and Flowers*. Really, sometimes you sound like Galahad on a white horse. Such gallantry!"

Mike Gentry grinned suddenly and shrugged.

"Let's not argue about anything tonight, baby," he said. "It isn't worth it."

Margo's dazzlingly lovely smile returned instantly.

"You're right, darling, she certainly isn't worth another word. Incidentally, how's your shadow?"

"Joey?" Mike asked. "Oh, fine. Worried as usual. Or even more than usual, I should say."

Mike Gentry told her then of Joey Orlando's "hunch" and insistence that his employer travel armed that evening.

When Margo had finished laughing at this, she asked Gentry teasingly, "And have you taken Joey's advice?"

Mike Gentry didn't smile in answer. "You know I don't pack a rod with me, baby, unless I'm certain I'm going to run into trouble," he said quietly.

THERE was a silence, an oddly uncomfortable silence which lasted almost a minute and was finally broken by Gentry.

"Everything seems odd tonight, baby," he said, "just like we were missing on a few sparks, you and me. Anything wrong?"

Margo looked up quickly, and for an instant it seemed as if there might have been fear in her lovely blue eyes. But then her bright smile flashed, and she laughed quickly.

"Why, Mike, honey. I didn't notice anything. Maybe you're just a little jittery over the game tonight."

Gentry shook his head soberly. "I never get jittery, baby," he said, "over anything."

"Well, you were worried about Frazier," Margo retorted quickly, "right from the minute you sat down."

Again Gentry shook his head. "Worried, yeah. And perhaps a little sore. But not jittery, baby." He rubbed a big, well manicured hand over his eyes tiredly and sighed.

The waiter came, then, with their drinks.

Margo reached across the table, touching Gentry's hand lightly with her own.

"You're nerves are a little raw tonight, darling. They always are, even if you know it or not, before a big

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game. Relax, honey, and let's not get into a fight."

Mike Gentry grinned, patting the girl's hand between his own.

"Okay, baby. I'll relax."

He lifted his glass, smiling over the rim of it at her.

"Here's to us," he said. "May we live long and well, eh, baby?"

Mike Gentry was too busy downing his drink to notice that Margo choked, for the slightest fraction of an instant, over the first sip of hers. . . .

CHAPTER III

Eighty-Five Grand

IT was a big, old-fashioned mansion-style hotel on the edge of town. Tradition, long-custom in the higher bracket gambling fraternity had made this place the rendezvous for innumerable "big" games over the past forty years in that city.

Pete Ubanik, fat, florid faced race track owner had a suite here, and it was in one of the rooms of the suite that the game for the evening was slated to be played.

They were all there when Mike Gentry arrived, waiting for him with the impassive serenity known only to professional gamblers. A white coated waiter was setting out liquor on a sideboard filled with varied foodstuffs.

The greetings—each knew the others—were quiet, brief, business-like.

In the corner of the room two flat-faced, stocky, muscular rod men sat rigidly beside a heavy, solid looking strong box, the "bank." They glanced at Gentry only briefly as he entered.

Pete Ubanik, the race track owner, had been chosen for the deal that night. Sometimes he sat in on the relatively smaller games, but he knew himself to be too much of an amateur for this session and was therefore staying out. Honest, above any price, he'd make an excellent man for the deal.

Mike Gentry had seen Curtis Frazier, once Cushy Francesco, when he'd entered the room. But aside from a quiet, "Hello, Frazier," he hadn't spoken another word to him. Frazier was short, moustached, too well tailored. His face was thin, eyes brown and darting, nose hawked, and mouth predatory. He seemed to sense Gentry's disapproval of his presence.

Blair Wallis, a blond, red-faced, chunky fellow in his late thirties, had the table position to the left of Gentry. Wallis was reliable as far as Gentry knew. A West Coast gambler who'd once operated a huge casino in the suburbs of Los Angeles, Wallis was merely passing through the city and had decided to sit in.

To the right of Gentry's table position sat Hugh Garrity, gray haired, mild mannered, bespectacled, once one of the biggest gamblers in the East, now owner of a string of casinos throughout the middle west. A man who'd been born with cards in his fists, he had cleaned up over two hundred thousand dollars in Alaska when only a kid of sixteen.

Frazier and Luke Henchley sat across the table from Gentry. Tall, lean, utterly bald, Henchley had a high domed forehead which shone almost mirror-like in the glare of the hanging table light above the green felt game board.

Henchley's mouth had a perpetually sad droop at the corners. It was rumored that he had smiled once, disliked the sensation, and had never done so since. It was also rumored that Henchley's game—with sucker bait—was strictly *off* the level. However, none of his opponents for the evening, save perhaps Frazier, was sucker bait.

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Henchley would play clean this evening, or Henchley wouldn't leave.

Pete Ubanik, in his deep growling voice, announced the game rules for the evening. Rules that had been agreed upon by the players in advance.

"Table stakes," Ubanik said, "of ten thousand dollars a man for the first hour from the first deal. Twenty thousand a man for the second hour. Thirty thousand for the third hour. Open play during last and fourth hour. Is that understood?"

Ubanik, for no apparent reason, then cleared his throat in the dead silence of the room, broke a clean deck, and the game began. . . .

AT the end of the first hour's play, Gentry, feeling out the others' games, had lost two thousand dollars. He had removed his dinner jacket and a highball was at his elbow, a cigarette hanging dejectedly from the corner of his wide mouth. His eyes were very much alert.

Wallis, surprisingly enough, had been pushed out at the three quarter hour mark by plunge betting on Henchley's part. Hugh Garrity stood several thousand in the red, and the sweating Curtis Frazier had lost but three hundred dollars. Henchley had taken the preliminary session, winning a little over fourteen thousand dollars.

The second hour's play brought revisions in several instances. Wallis, now working on a twenty thousand table stake, was able to play his own type of game more freely and with better results. When the hour was over he had won over twenty thousand. Frazier had lost ten grand, Henchley fifteen thousand, Garrity, five thousand. Mike Gentry had cleared something around eight thousand dollars.

Pete Ubanik broke the third fresh deck, checked the table stake chip amounts, and the third hour—thirty thousand table stakes—began.

It was midway in this session that Frazier, out another ten thousand in poorly calculated poker, began to go wild, dropping ten grand more in as many minutes.

Mike Gentry took the next pot, approximately twenty thousand dollars in it, from Frazier. As Gentry raked in the chips he stared stonily at Frazier.

"Table stake gone, Mr. Frazier," Ubanik called out. His sweat-beaded, sharp features chalk white, Frazier rose and left the table. As the next hand began Gentry could hear Frazier demanding a double highball from the white coated attendant. A big help that would be to an already fuzzled brain.

Just before the third period ended, Henchley hit a streak which brought the lean, bald, sad-mouthed gambler up ahead of his table stake by ten thousand or better. He still held this advantage when the third hour ended.

Mike Gentry was now twenty-three thousand dollars in front of his stake. Wallis approximately even, Garrity a few thousand ahead. But the open play was next. No limit on stakes or bets. The night's heavy winnings and losses would emerge at the end of this hour.

Pete Ubanik had to call Curtis Frazier from the bar.

"Last hour, Mr. Frazier. Open play. Do you care to take your chair?"

Flushed over the pallor still deep in his cheeks, Frazier rejoined the table group. Gentry stared at him coldly, then set to stacking his chips. Thirty-two thousand in the hole already, and the steepest hour of the game was coming up, Gentry thought bitterly. The damned fool Frazier couldn't

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stand much more of this.

Ubanik's voice broke in on Gentry's thoughts.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked. "No stake. No limit."

Mike Gentry calmly turned his impassive expression to the dealer and watched Ubanik's fat but nimble fingers split the cellophane from the fresh deck.

THE opening pot—over thirty thousand dollars—was more than indicative of the tenor of the gambling to be witnessed in the next hour. Wallis set the pace by raking it in. Gentry and Garrity had dropped after their openers, the white faced Frazier a little later, and the bulk of the loss was taken by the moody Henchley.

Gentry took the next pot, and the one after that, stacking a profit of almost forty thousand dollars on the two hands. For the next three rounds he played light, dropping early against an imposing array of cards drawn by Garrity on each occasion.

The pace of the play then jumped another notch, as Henchley, coming back, raked in a twenty-thousand pot, to be followed by Frazier, who—through unfortunately over-eager betting—found himself with but ten thousand on a pot that, well played, would have netted him four times that amount.

It was shortly after this that Gentry began a six-pot run which left him far ahead of the field at the break of the streak. There were only four other hands after this, and Gentry, riding easy on the first three, played high on the final one, taking the largest pot of the evening.

"Time, gentlemen," Ubanik said quietly. "Cash in your chips."

Garrity looked at Gentry wryly.

"You'll do all the cashing this time, Gentry," he said. "I consider myself lucky to be out only ten grand."

Henchley merely glared sourly at Gentry, saying nothing as he rose from the table. Wallis, who had cleared a little over eight thousand, looked ruefully at the huge stack of chips before Gentry.

"You play a smart game, Gentry," he observed amiably enough. "No wonder your name is legend, even in Los Angeles."

Mike Gentry shrugged, rising.

"The bank owes me eighty-five grand, Pete," he said to Ubanik. Gentry deliberately ignored Frazier, who still sat strickenly before a small scattering of chips. Frazier's losses for the evening, Gentry had figured roughly, ran close to fifty thousand dollars.

"The draft will be in your bank tomorrow morning, Mike," Ubanik assured him. "Okay?"

"Okay," Gentry grinned. "Very much okay, Pete."

Henchley spoke then, to Frazier.

"Come on, pal," he said sullenly, "you promised me a lift back uptown."

Gentry watched Frazier rise slowly from the table. The dapper, sharp faced little night club proprietor seemed almost dazed. He looked at Gentry blankly for an instant, wetting his lips with a lizard-like tongue. Then he followed Henchley toward the door.

For a flickering instant, Gentry frowned. Henchley wasn't good company for anyone, even Frazier. Then, mentally, he shrugged. He turned to Wallis, Ubanik and Garrity.

"How about a drink, gentlemen?"

CHAPTER IV

"This Is It!"

IT WAS almost three o'clock when Gentry left the brownstone mansion

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hotel. The keen, tangy pleasantness of the autumn night still held, and Gentry—deciding to clear his head of smoke and alcohol fumes—elected to walk back uptown.

As Gentry started leisurely uptown he turned over worriedly the events of the evening concerning Frazier. Those losses of Frazier's had been tremendously steep, even for a man of his money. And in addition to that, Gentry was troubled over the apparent familiarity between Frazier and Henchley. It was the first he had known about it.

"I wonder," Gentry muttered half-aloud, "if the dammed punk is having trouble clearing expenses at the Panther Club." But then he shook his head. There was no reason in the world to suspect that. Outwardly, at least, the Panther Club was making money hand over fist.

Gentry had covered four or five blocks before he became aware of the low, black limousine.

In the almost deserted neighborhood streets, its motor was audible even as far as two blocks away. The first time Gentry noticed it he turned, curious, and glanced back.

It was moving along the curb at a snail's pace, only its parking lights aglow.

Gentry frowned, but turned around and continued his walk.

He saw it again two blocks later, ahead of him this time, moving at a perpendicular angle slowly through a cross street intersection. But there was no mistaking it, even in the darkness and from a distance of several blocks.

There was something about the dark outline of the limousine that seemed familiar to Gentry. Again he frowned puzzledly, his expression growing faintly annoyed.

Two blocks later, Gentry heard the limousine down the street behind him once again. And when he turned he saw it proceeding slowly along the curb two blocks away, its motor almost idling.

It was now clear to Gentry that the limousine had been circling around and around his route, keeping him always within a two block radius. The annoyance on Gentry's face gave way to a slow anger. His lips tightened and he paused an instant. There was an alleyway half a block ahead of Gentry.

As Gentry went on again he quickened his pace deliberately, and was rewarded by the sound of the limousine's motor responding. At the alleyway Gentry turned abruptly, stepping into its blanketing darkness.

Now he heard the limousine roaring into second as it shot down the street toward the alley in which he waited. A screech of brakes less than five yards away in the street, and the limousine stopped.

Mike Gentry stood there in the darkness, waiting.

A CAR door slammed, and footsteps crossed to the sidewalk quickly. Then, suddenly, a short wiry figure stepped into the darkened alleyway.

Gentry took a deep breath, held it, peering through the darkness, trying to make out the—

"Why, you punk!" Gentry suddenly exploded.

"Mike! Jeeeeze, it's good to find yuh!" Joey Orlando's voice broke forth.

Gentry stepped from the darkness and confronted his valet-bodyguard. Joey was now grinning in sort of red-faced abashed relief, his horse face beaming sheepishly.

Mike Gentry saw the limousine under the streetlight, now. No wonder it had seemed familiar even from a distance. It was one of his own.

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"What's the big idea," Gentry demanded.

Joey Orlando shuffled his feet, starting to reply.

Gentry cut off his words. "You had me figuring the finger was on me, you crazy loon. Good gods, Joey, when are you going to get some brains?"

"I knew if I waited outside Ubanik's, especially since you told me you didn't need me tonight, you'd get sore," Joey said apologetically. "But I couldn't just sit on my hands, could I, when there was my hunch?"

"So you decided to shadow me as a big protection, eh?" Mike Gentry asked patiently.

"Yeah, boss. That's right," Joey declared.

Gentry sighed. "You're a good guy, Joey. You mean well, very well, I know. But now you're going to get back into that car and drive on. Understand?"

Joey Orlando nodded miserably, worriedly.

"And I don't want any more well-meaning shadowing, understand?" Gentry demanded.

"Sure, Mike," Joey muttered. "Sure thing."

Suddenly Gentry grinned. "I have a hunch it wouldn't be a sure thing, Joey. I got a hunch you'd start your little tail game all over again, staying out of my sight this time. And I know how I can scotch that idea."

Joey looked guilty, then blank.

"Huh?" he asked.

"I'll drive, Joey," Gentry said, grinning. "You finish my walk for me, how's that?"

"But, Mike!" Joey bleated.

"Keys in the car?" Gentry demanded.

Joey nodded.

"Fine," Gentry grinned. "Goodnight, Joey. I'll see you back at the apartment in a few hours. Have a nice walk."

"Take it easy, boss!" Joey begged. "Get onto the boulevards and stay there, please!"

"Goodnight, Joey," Gentry repeated, climbing in behind the wheel of the big limousine.

Gentry drove away leaving his valet-bodyguard standing forlornly on the sidewalk, futiley searching up and down the deserted neighborhood streets for a taxi. . . .

IN FRONT of the Panther Club, Mike Gentry turned his limousine over to one of the fifth assistant doormen. And as he entered the luxurious foyer of the swank club, he nodded briefly to the hat check girl, giving her his coat and hat.

It was then that he noticed Gloria Allen coming across the foyer in her abbreviated cigarette vending uniform. He grinned, nodding to her, and her blush was almost as crimson as her lovely red hair.

The last show was ending, and the music floating from the dining room accompanied a male crooner's rendition of a popular ballad. Gentry went into the cocktail lounge, summoned the head bartender and asked him if Frazier had been in.

"Yes, sir," Gentry was told, "but he left since then. He came in about an hour ago with a Mr. Henchley. They only stayed until Miss Margo Drusane finished her number, then they left."

Gentry nodded. "That's too bad. Is Miss Drusane in her dressing room?"

"Oh no, sir," the bartender said. "Like I told you, she left with the boss, I mean Mr. Frazier, and Mr. Henchley."

There was no emotion on Gentry's features to indicate that the information was even slightly surprising.

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"Thanks," he said. "Shake up a sidecar, will you?"

As the bartender left, Gentry allowed himself a frown. Margo's leaving with Frazier was not too surprising. She hadn't expected Gentry back that evening, and Frazier often took her home. But again, the tie-in with Henchley was too strange to suit Gentry in the least.

Suddenly Gentry shrugged. He was letting his imagination get the best of it. Undoubtedly Frazier was seeing Margo home in the course of things, and was possibly stuck with Henchley as a companion for a few hours even if he didn't like it too well.

And yet—

Mike Gentry resolved to talk long and well to Curtis Frazier the first thing the following morning.

The bartender returned with Gentry's sidecar, and the latter reached into his pocket, only to find himself again out of cigarettes.

"I'd like some smokes," Gentry said, "Send a cigarette girl over." And then, for no reason he could think of, he added: "Send Gloria Allen over."

The bartender nodded and turned away. Gentry wondered if he'd caught a flicker of amusement in the other's eyes.

When the redheaded cigarette girl came over, she was visibly a little flustered. Gentry noticed that her smile, usually automatic and impersonal, was both eager and uncertain, and was forced to admit to himself that the lovely little redhead had an undeniably fresh charm which was exceptionally unusual to find in a glitter-dive such as the Panther Club.

"Good morning, Mr. Gentry," Gloria said.

Gentry was a trifle startled, then he grinned. "That's right, Gloria, it is morning, isn't it? I never think of this hour as being morning. Must be the hours I keep."

"One box or two, Mr. Gentry?" Gloria asked, fumbling for his favorite brand of cigarettes in confusion.

"Two," Gentry said. "Do you like working here, Gloria?"

The girl looked surprised.

"Why, ah, why—" she began.

"You don't, particularly, do you?" Gentry persisted.

SUDDENLY the girl shook her head emphatically, red locks flying about her shoulders.

"No. I guess I don't, a great deal," she admitted. "But the pay is good, and with tips, I don't know where I could make as—"

Gentry cut her off. "I understand. Were you born in this town?"

Gloria shook her head. "No. Out west. California." She hesitated an instant. "It was beautiful out there."

"Big city blues, eh?" Gentry said knowingly.

The girl blushed. "No. Not really. It's just that I, ah, well, I'd like to go back, sometime," she finished lamely.

"Maybe you will sometime," Gentry declared. He lifted his sidecar, drained the rest of it, put down the glass and handed the girl a bill.

"See you later, Gloria, and thanks," Gentry said. He walked away from the bar and into the foyer. Wide-eyed in surprise, the lovely little cigarette girl stood there stupidly holding the bill he'd given her, staring after him.

The bartender's voice, sharp, cynical, broke in on her daydream.

"Wake up, baby. He's too big a shot to be bothered with the help."

The girl looked up, startled, crimsoning in acute embarrassment. She opened her mouth to speak, changed her mind, and turned swiftly away to hide the sudden moisture trembling on her eyelids. . . .

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OUTSIDE the Panther Club, Mike Gentry gave instructions to the major general doorman to have his limousine sent to his apartment's garage, said, no, he didn't want a taxi, and started homeward on foot.

He'd gone a block when he encountered two grimy-faced little bootblacks crouched in a darkened store doorway shooting craps.

For fully a minute Gentry stood there looking at them rolling their dice for pennies and nickles before they became aware of his presence.

They both looked up simultaneously, frightenedly, staring at him with round, awed eyes. Then the chubbiest and most grimy faced of the two urchins exclaimed:

"Jeepers—it's Mike Gentry, Art!"

Gentry bowed in mock acknowledgement.

"Good evening, chums. Got room in that game for another?"

The two urchins exchanged incredulous glances, then stared wordlessly, frightenedly, back at Gentry.

"What are the limits, chum?" Gentry asked, stepping into the wide doorway. "Two cents, three cents?"

The chubby little bootblack found courage to answer, his voice squeaky and uncertain.

"Nickle limit."

Mike Gentry crouched down beside the tykes soberly.

"You don't mind?" he asked. He fished into his pocket and brought out a scattering of small change, nickles, pennies, dimes. "Who's got the dice?" he asked cheerfully.

The chubby little bootblack produced the two worn dice in a grubby paw.

"I was tossing," he said. "I'd just made my point."

"Well, toss again, pal," Gentry said. "I've got a nickle says you don't."

The skinny little tyke, wordless until now, said, "Me, too," and tossed a nickle into the center.

The chubby urchin blew on the cubes in his grubby fist, shook them hard against his ear, and tossed.

"Eighter," Gentry said. "Any side bets?"

"'Nother nickle says I make," the chubby urchin said.

"You're on," Gentry told him. He took a nickle from the pot and put in a dime.

The urchin went through the blowing, rattling, and rolling again. The worn cubes tumbled from his grubby little paw and bounced up—seven.

"Too bad," Gentry said. "My win." He looked at the skinny tyke and said: "Your dice now, pal."

"I'll leave my dime," the skinny urchin declared tremulously, "and add t'ree cents."

"Covered," said Gentry solemnly. He threw three coppers into the pot.

The skinny tyke didn't blow on the dice, but had his own ritual. He shook them in his left fist, then his right, and tossed.

He made a six.

"Any side bets?" Gentry asked.

"Nuts," said the skinny one. "I'm ridin' too much awready."

He went through his own ritual again and tossed. Eight came up. He tried again. Four. On his fifth toss he caught a seven.

"I win again," Gentry said. "And this time I get the cubes." He took the dice from the skinny urchin, picked up the coins he'd won, and threw down a quarter.

"You two cover it?" he asked.

THE urchins exchanged calculating glances, then nodded. They brought forth enough small change in nickles and pennies to cover Gentry's quarter.

Solemnly, Gentry tossed the dice.

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He sevened.

Gentry took in the quarter.

"I win. Cover another two-bits?"

The urchins went into a huddle. hey came out grimly.

"We got twenty-t'ree cents amongst us," the chubby one said. "Y're on fer that."

Again Gentry rattled the dice. Again he tossed. The cubes bounced out, stopped.

"Seven!" exclaimed the chubby urchin sickly.

"Jeepers!" said the skinny tyke dully.

"I win again. You guys cleaned?" Gentry asked.

The bootblacks nodded abashedly.

Mike Gentry rose, brushing off his knees. He stared soberly down on the urchins.

"Did you learn anything, chums?" he asked.

They didn't answer.

"If you didn't, you should have," Gentry went on. "Gambling is a sucker's game. You kids lost half a night's earnings in just about four minutes. Think of how hard you worked and how quick it went, chums. And get wise to yourselves!"

Mike Gentry slipped the cheap, worn cubes in his pocket and started to turn away.

"Hey, Mr. Gentry," the chubby kid exclaimed, "them's our dice!"

Mike Gentry lifted his eyebrows.

"What do you want with dice?" he asked.

The chubby tyke colored under his grin, shuffling his feet in embarrassment.

"You got me, Mr. Gentry. I dunno," he muttered.

Mike Gentry grinned suddenly.

"They're no toys for you guys," he said. "But in my business maybe I can use them. They were lucky for me tonight. I cleaned you guys of darned near six-bits. Tell you what, I'll buy 'em from you. What's your price?"

The urchins went into a huddle. They came out, and the chubby one spoke.

"You kin keep 'em," he said. "Wit' our compleemints, Mr. Gentry."

Gentry shook his head. "Uh-uh. I'll keep 'em. But I'll give you what I think they're worth." He pulled out his wallet, removed a five dollar bill and handed it to them. "Split it evenly," he said. "And don't try to bet it on *anything*. It isn't luck money. I won it from a damned fool."

The urchins [illegible] bill as Mike Gentry strolled away.

AT THE next corner, Gentry ran into Pat Flavin, the big-shouldered, white haired, rock-jawed plainclothesman assigned to this particular sector of the night-club beat. Flavin had been a copper in harness in this same sector when Mike Gentry had peddled papers on that very corner.

"Well, well, if it ain't the gentleman gambler!" Flavin exclaimed. "How're tricks, Mike?"

"No squawks, Pat," Gentry told him amiably. "Everything under control?"

"Peaceful and quiet," Flavin sighed. "In the good old days there used to be a little action on this beat."

"You've done your job too well," Gentry grinned. "If anyone wants to start trouble these days, he's goes to some other copper's beat to do it."

Flavin laughed heartily at this. "Maybe you're right," he acknowledged. "Well, sleep well, Mike."

"I'll try to," Gentry promised.

"You shouldn't have trouble," Flavin said. "You're one of the few guys in this neighborhood who deesn't have a guilty conscience."

"You flatter me, Pat," Gentry said.

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"I'm glad I don't have to," Flavin assured him.

Mike Gentry moved on, then, turning off the still brightly lighted night club belt two blocks farther on. He'd walked another block and a half when he passed the darkened alley from which the hoarse, muffled voice suddenly shouted:

"Hey—Gentry!"

Gentry halted, turning to face the darkened alleyway.

"Who is it?" he asked, startled.

"This is it, Gentry," said the voice from the darkness "This is it!"

Mike Gentry had no chance. The orange flame spitting out from the darkness at him flashed five times, each flash splitting the darkness in unison with the deafening reports of an automatic pistol.

Gentry fell face forward, sprawling into the mud of the alley darkness, the cry that had come to his lips choked out in a welling of his own blood.

Mike Gentry's assassin had done his job thoroughly, coolly, and quickly. . . .

CHAPTER V

"Of Course You're Dead"

MIKE GENTRY'S body had been dragged farther into the darkness of the alleyway and left there by his assassin within swift seconds of the moment he fell dead. And in less time than that, the assassin was gone.

It was not until then, however, that the shadowy figure, who'd been standing less than fifty feet away on the other side of the street as witness to the slaying, emerged from the doorway which had sheltered him, and quietly strolled into the alleyway.

He was a medium-sized man, wearing a black raincoat, a black slouch hat, and black shirt and tie.

His face, in the shadow of the black felt hat's brim, was indistinguishable.

For fully a minute he stood over Mike Gentry's body, staring down speculatively at it. Then, gently, he stirred the corpse with the toe of his shoe.

"All right, Gentry," he said quietly. "Get up."

There was no movement from the corpse, and the man dressed in black seemed not to expect any.

"Come on, Gentry," he repeated in that quiet, commanding voice. "Get up and come along."

It was then that the darkness started graying out into light once more for Mike Gentry. He groaned, putting his hands flat against the mud of the alley, and pushed himself upward.

Weakly, Mike Gentry rose to his feet and stood there swaying. Then his equilibrium returned, and with it his sense of vision. He stared around bewilderedly, then saw the shadowy figure.

"Wha—" Mike Gentry began.

"Take it easy, Gentry," said the shadowy figure. "Take it easy, and look down at what's lying by your feet."

Automatically, Gentry found himself obeying the shadowy stranger. And what he saw brought an exclamation of horror to his lips.

"Good God!" Gentry gasped.

"Look closely," said the shadowy stranger, "and see whose body lies at your feet."

"It—it's mine!" Gentry said chokingly. "It's, it's my body. And it's riddled with bullets."

The shadowy figure nodded. "That's right, Mike Gentry. You've been slain. You're dead."

"But, but—" Gentry choked hoarsely.

The shadowy figure nodded again,

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almost sympathetically.

Memory returned to Gentry then.

"You—you—" he began.

The shadowy figure shook his head.

"No. I didn't kill you. I knew you were going to die, however, and that's why I was waiting across the street in the doorway. So I could take you along."

NOW Gentry was aware for the first time that the stranger's features were indistinguishable under the low brim of that black hat. And he was aware, too, of something else, an eerie, chilling something else that told him

tion he formed would be.

"Who are you?" Gentry asked.

"Death Number Nine," said the shadowy figure.

"Death Number Nine?" Gentry repeated incredulously.

"An agent of Death," the shadowy figure amplified. "There are many of us. Officially, I am called Death Number Nine." He paused. "Now we'd better not waste any more time. Come along."

Mike Gentry covered his face with his hands, standing there trembling in the mud and chill of the alley darkness.

"I'm not dead," he muttered. "This is crazy. This is some damned pipe dream. Why, I've hands, and arms, and I breathe—I'm not dead!"

"Look again at your body lying there in the mud, if you must," the shadowy figure, Death Number Nine, declared. "That should remove any doubt you might have."

Slowly, shudderingly, Mike Gentry forced himself to stare down at the body lying at his feet—*his* body. For almost a minute he stared incredulously. Then he raised his eyes.

"It's always hard to get used to the idea," Death Number Nine declared. "But you seem to be taking it better than most of them usually do."

The fear and horror had left Gentry's voice now, leaving only bewilderment and shock.

"Then this is really it, eh?" Gentry mumbled dazedly.

Death Number Nine nodded.

"That's right. This, as you say, is it."

"I'm dead," Gentry said tonelessly.

"Of course, you're dead," Death Number Nine agreed. "Now come along." He sighed. "Let's not drag this out with any silly you-are-so, I-am-

"Come along?" Gentry blinked. "Come along where?"

"With me," Death Number Nine said cryptically. "You'll see soon enough."

"To, to Heaven?" Gentry asked. He felt eerily idiotic asking that question.

"That all depends," Death Number Nine said. Then he added: "It's really very funny how many people ask that question. It never occurs to them that they'd wind up anywhere else."

Gentry took a step forward, then halted. He turned and gazed down at his riddled corpse again. After an instant he turned back to Death Number Nine. His voice was hoarse as he asked the question.

"Who did it?"

"Did what?" Death Number Nine asked.

"Rubbed me out, gave me the lead," said Gentry huskily.

Death Number Nine shrugged with elaborate casualness.

"I couldn't tell you even if I knew, which I don't. I was just supposed to be here at this time and at this place to bring you along when you were killed. That's all I know about it."

"But you saw the whole thing," Gentry said. "Didn't you?"

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Death Number Nine nodded. "Certainly I did," he said a little impatiently. "But I didn't see any more of the person who killed you than you did. Now, for goodness sakes, come along."

Mike Gentry moved forward.

"Okay," he muttered. "You've got the aces, and they're back to back. Where do we go?"

Death Number Nine pointed to a deeply shadowed niche in a wall of the alley blackness.

"Through there," he said. "Follow me."

Mike Gentry blinked unbelievingly. But Death Number Nine stepped confidently into that inky niche of the darkness—and disappeared!

Gentry gaped foolishly. Then, for an instant, he turned to take one last look at his crumpled body lying there in bloody mud.

"Come on," Death Number Nine's voice called impatiently from the darkness of that mysterious niche. "Come on!"

Mike Gentry tore his eyes from his body and started after Death Number Nine. The inky darkness of the niche yawned invitingly toward him and he stepped into it without hesitation. . . .

IT SEEMED to Mike Gentry, after he had stepped through the doorway of darkness and emerged into that strange, etherial forest on the other side, that the journey which followed lasted no more than an hour in all.

For the first ten minutes of the journey—or what seemed to Gentry to be comparable to that length of time—they had followed the shadows of the forest pathway until reaching an abrupt fork in the trail.

The fork was completely enshrouded in a light, almost feathery mist, and Death Number Nine took Gentry's hand then, for it was almost impossible to see through that thick mantle of fog. They moved on slowly like this for what seemed to be another twenty minutes, until, quite suddenly, they stepped from the mist banks into a vast, open, meadowed area where the sun was shining dazzlingly down on them.

"Here we are" Death Number Nine said conversationally.

Mike Gentry stood there blinking in the unexpected sunlight, his eyes filled with awed wonder.

"Where?" the gambler demanded. "Where are we? What do you call this place?"

"Eternity," Death Number Nine said matter-of-factly.

Mike Gentry stared around slowly, regarding the moss green meadows, the low, rolling hills and tranquil, pastel blue sky. He shook his head unbelievingly, searching for a word to describe it.

"Why, why, it's, it's beautiful!" he exclaimed foolishly, aware that even the word he'd never had in his vocabulary before was pitifully inadequate.

Death Number Nine nodded.

"This part of it is," he agreed. Dryly, he added: "There are other parts, however, not quite on this level."

For another wordless fifteen minutes, then, they walked on, Mike Gentry and Death Number Nine, over lush green hills and across wide, sweeping meadows, until they came at last to the soft dirt road which cut deeply into a sudden series of pillowed green hills.

For perhaps a quarter of a mile they followed this road, the hills on either side of it rising higher and higher with every yard, until they reached the turn. There, at the turn, Gentry had his first glimpse of The Gate.

The Gate covered the entire road. It was more like a tall ivory wall than a gate. A tall ivory wall with a door in

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the center, and an old man in a white flowing robe and a long white beard sitting patiently beside the door.

AS THEY drew closer, Gentry saw that the old man held a huge gold key in his hand. He looked up as he became aware of Gentry's and Death Number Nine's approach.

Gentry wasn't certain, but he thought that he saw the old man grin above that long white beard.

"Hello, Rudy," Death Number Nine said, as they reached The Gate.

"Howdy," said the old man. "Business slow, eh? Only one you brung in so far today."

"A lot more coming. They all seemed to bunch up at the same time today, Rudy," Death Number Nine declared in the casual tones of a magazine salesman discussing canvassing.

The old man Death Number Nine had called Rudy looked keenly at Mike Gentry, making no effort to conceal his curiosity.

"Who's this one?" he asked.

"Gentry—Michael. A gambler. Shot and dragged into an alley," Death Number Nine replied.

The old man called Rudy looked on Gentry with what seemed to be a new respect.

"Well, well," he said. "Violent, eh?"

"Very," said Death Number Nine, his voice dryly amused.

Mike Gentry glanced from the old man to his eerie escort unbelievingly. They were discussing him just as if he weren't there, as if he were—and Gentry gagged on his own simile—a newspaper murder case!

And it came to Mike Gentry then, in a strange, spine-chilling sort of numbness, that within hours, back in the world of those alive, he *would* be a subject for murder headlines!

Death Number Nine's voice came to Gentry, then, breaking through his thoughts.

"Is the Board in session, Rudy?"

"Sure is," affirmed the old man. "Pretty durned crowded, too."

"Hope I can rush this one through," Death Number Nine observed. "Like I told you, I got a rush of cases waiting to be picked up back there."

Rudy moved to the door, inserted the enormous gold key in an even larger gold lock. The ivory door in The Gate swung inward, then. Death Number Nine touched Gentry's elbow lightly in summons.

"Come on in, Mike," he said. "You'll find this pretty interesting."

Looking through the open door, Mike Gentry saw that across its threshold lay a vast, marble room. It seemed larger than any depot Mike had ever imagined. And it was filled with people. People, unquestionably, in the same state of entry to a new world as himself.

"I won't feel lonely, anyway," Mike Gentry muttered. Then, wetting his lips with his tongue, he followed his guide through the door. . . .

CHAPTER VI

"Hear All! Hear All!"

THE entrance of Death Number Nine and his charge, Mike Gentry, caused a small murmuring of curiosity among those gathered in the huge marble hall. And as for Gentry, he gaped around the room and at its occupants with no attempt to conceal his stunned astonishment.

Everything in the vast hall, Gentry became immediately aware, was marble. The floor, the ceiling, the walls. The benches along the walls, on which were an incredible array of human beings of both sexes, all ages, and all

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conditions of dress, were also of marble.

At the far end of the room, gleaming against the vast marble wall in which it was placed, was a small, standard-sized gold door.

The people sitting on the benches against the wall numbered almost a hundred, and each of them sat beside a faceless, black-attired Agent of Death similar in appearance to Gentry's own escort, Death Number Nine.

Mike Gentry noticed with some surprise that all the occupants of this vast room seemed rather well under control. There was no alarm or hysteria on any of their faces, and if there were any standard emotion depicted universally among them, it was of awed, unbelieving wonder at themselves, their escorts, and their surroundings.

"They all in the same boat as me?" Gentry whispered to Death Number Nine.

His guide nodded.

"But of course. Naturally, if you'll look around, you'll see that each of them has just been brought from his own particular form of death. That old lady at the far end of the room, for example, the one wearing the nightgown and flannel bedcap, died in her sleep. That rather astonished young chap sitting across from her in his shorts, stepped down an open elevator shaft in his apartment when he was drunk. That chap with the peaked hat and striped overalls was a locomotive engineer who missed his signals at a grade crossing."

"Where are his passengers?" Gentry asked.

Death Number Nine *tsked* regretfully.

"Curious thing," he replied. "They all escaped unscathed, even the fireman who was in the cab with the engineer. The Death Agent at the crossing was very disappointed. He'd thought he'd get enough in that one haul to take the rest of the day off."

"How sad," Mike Gentry observed dryly.

"You'll find them an interesting assortment," Death Number Nine declared.

"Any other, ah, murder victims like myself?" Gentry asked.

Death Number Nine shook his head.

"Not yet. But I expect two of them in a little while."

As his guide spoke, he led Gentry over to a vacant place on the marble benches to the right.

"You wait right here," Death Number Nine instructed Gentry, "while I go inside and see if I can't get your case moved up ahead of these others."

"Well," Gentry gasped. "Never thought I'd have pull up here."

"You haven't," Death Number Nine said a trifle testily. "I just happen to know an angel who's court bailiff on this session. He does favors for me like that when I have to get back to pick up other cases."

Ridiculously enough, Gentry felt squelched.

DEATH NUMBER NINE left him then, heading toward the gold door at the far end of the room, and Mike Gentry turned to take stock of his associates on either side of him.

To his right sat a white haired, red-faced, portly old gent clad in loud golf knickers and a multicolored sweater. He smiled rather vaguely at Gentry, moving over a bit to make more room on the bench.

"Hello, there," he hissed, and to Gentry's amazement, extended a pudgy paw. "My name is Farrell, J. T. Farrell. President of Farrell and Hobbs. Insurance, my line."

Mike Gentry pumped the other's hand briefly.

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"Glad to know you. Insurance, eh?" Gentry observed. "Must have left your family pretty damned well fixed, eh?"

The portly insurance executive's expression changed from that of commercial cordiality to swift woe.

"Dammit," he said. "I quite forgot. Still can't get used to this thing. Being dead, I mean."

"I understand perfectly," Gentry said wryly. "I'm having trouble like that myself."

The insurance executive ignored this. He went on talking.

"Playing golf," he declared with puzzled reminiscence, waving a hand toward his attire. "Bolt of lightning. Damnedest thing. Pow!"

He slammed one hand into his palm to illustrate the suddenness of it all, frowned.

"They all told me I'd die of a heart attack on the damned golf course some day," the insurance executive said. Suddenly he beamed proudly. "But I didn't. I fooled 'em. Heart, hell. Strong heart. Took the damned lightning to do it!"

"Yes indeed," Gentry observed dryly. "You really fooled 'em all right."

"Seventeenth hole," the insurance executive recalled sadly, still paying no attention to what Gentry said. "Needed only an eight on that final hole to come in under a hundred. Damned shame. Can't see why I wasn't allowed to finish that last hole. Just dropped a ten-foot putt on the seventeenth green, too. Game was on."

The portly insurance executive sighed, lapsed into a silence which completely excluded any further conversation on Gentry's part.

In spite of everything, Gentry grinned. He turned his attention then to his left, where a thin, be-smocked, bespectacled young man with a pad and pencil in his hand sat intently scribbling formulas and muttering to himself under his breath.

Gentry noted that the young man's smock was discolored by innumerable chemicals, in addition to being very badly scorched. The young man was all too obviously fresh from a laboratory of some sort.

"Hello, chum," Gentry said.

"Eh?" the young man looked up startledly.

"I said hello," Gentry told him.

"Oh." The young man smiled vaguely. "Hello." He bent his head over the pad again and resumed scribbling equations and formulas on it.

"Inventing something?" Gentry asked.

Again the young man looked up startledly. And again there was that vague smile.

"Oh. Yes. Yes, I am. An explosive. It will have five hundred times the force of nitroglycerin, y'know," he declared. Once more he bent over his pad.

MIKE GENTRY shook his head marvellingly from side to side. Here was a guy who didn't even know he was dead, apparently. Too engrossed in his work. Probably didn't even realize that whatever in the hell it had been that he was compounding, the explosive had gone off too soon and too well, blasting its inventor into infinity.

Gentry had heard of absent-minded young professors and slaving young geniuses. But here, evidently, was a slaving young genius who was both too busy and too absent-minded to take stock of the very grim fact that he was no longer numbered among the living.

And at that point in Gentry's meditation, Death Number Nine returned.

"All set," said his sponsor. "I rushed

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it through. You'll get a hearing ahead of these others. Come along."

Mike Gentry rose and followed Death Number Nine toward that gold door in the marble wall at the far end of the vast room. When they finally paused there, Death Number Nine pressed a gold buzzer on the marble wall beside the door.

"Come in!" a deep voice muffled by the door, came to their ears.

Death Number Nine pushed the door inward, stepping back against it to let Gentry enter first.

The room Mike Gentry now found himself in was small in comparison to the vast hall he'd just left, but, nevertheless, extremely spacious.

At the far end of this room—which was all marble, as the other had been—was a tall, long, marble dais that looked like an elongated version of the Supreme Court tribunal bench.

Behind this court-like marble bench sat half a dozen white-gowned dignitaries. Gentry knew that they were dignitaries because of the impressive cast to their features and the fact that each leaned his head against his palm, elbow propped on the bench.

It was then that Gentry noticed that a seat in the center of these six dignitaries was still vacant. And it was then that Death Number Nine leaned over and whispered sharply in Gentry's ear.

"Be respectful, and don't speak out of turn. You'll have a fair trial, so don't worry about that part."

Gentry had only time to blurt, "Trial? What do you mean, trial?"

Then one of the dignitaries at the end of the bench, a round-faced, rosy-cheeked, beardless chap, picked up a gavel and pounded on the marble bench.

"Rise as the Court enters!" he shouted.

To a man, the other five dignitaries rose, and then Gentry saw, sailing majestically into the room from a side entrance, the huge, black-bearded, toga-clad, cigar-smoking figure.

"Who's that?" Gentry hissed.

"Shhh. Saint Peter!" Death Number Nine hissed back.

MIKE GENTRY stared popeyed at the tableau as Saint Peter, vast of stature and magnificent in manner, strode to the big marble dais and around to his rightful seat in the middle of the row of six dignitaries.

As Saint Peter sat down, the rest resumed their seats, with the exception of the gavel-wielding chap, who pounded once again on the marble bench top.

"Hear all, hear all," he intoned loudly. "The case of this Court versus one Michael Gentry. Advance Death Number Nine and Mr. Gentry."

With that the gavel-wielding chap resumed his seat. Death Number Nine poked Gentry in the ribs.

"Now don't forget," he hissed warningly. "Retain your dignity."

And then, in spite of a sudden crazy impulse on Gentry's part to bolt and run, he found himself advancing toward that dais in step with his escort, Death Number Nine.

In front of the dais, looking up at the six flowing-robed figures, centered by the handsomely impressive, black-bearded, cigar-smoking Saint Peter, Mike Gentry found himself halting in unison with Death Number Nine.

There was no time now for Mike Gentry to question his escort, no time for him to get this strange tableau straightened out in his puzzled mind. No time for anything, but to go through with this weird hearing as best he could.

There was a silence, in which the

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six judges—Gentry had finally decided them to be judges—and Saint Peter sized up Gentry, while Gentry stared uncomfortably back at them.

Then Saint Peter cleared his throat.

"You are Michael Gentry?" Saint Peter asked.

Gentry nodded. "That's right."

"You seek admission to Heaven?" Saint Peter asked.

Mike Gentry blinked. This was the first time he'd thought of all this from that angle.

"Why, ah, since I'm dead, ah yes. Sure. Yes—I do," he said. Then he added: "Am I allowed to?"

"That," said Saint Peter, "is what this Court sits to determine."

"Huh?" Gentry blinked.

"Your life is about to be reviewed in trial, Mike," Saint Peter explained, his deep voice taking a kindly rumble. "If we decide it passes muster, we let you into Heaven. If not—it's the hot spot for you."

"You mean I'll be given Heaven or Hell on what you and the others decide?" Mike asked a trifle weakly.

"That's about the size of it, Mike," Saint Peter said kindly.

"Well, I'll be d—" Mike Gentry began.

Saint Peter held up his hand, eyes twinkling.

"We don't know if you will be or not, yet," he said.

MIKE GENTRY took a swift, searching appraisal of the others on the dais. The gavel-wielder seemed like an amiable chap. Mike recalled the advice of a famous lawyer who always said to pick fat people for your jury. The gavel-wielder passed on that point.

Next to the gavelwielder was a stern, thin-nosed, gray-bearded old man who looked gouty and bad-tempered. Mike winced, his eyes going to the next, a small bland-faced chap who seemed to be the youngest of the group. He had red hair and a pug nose; and seemed more interested in the ceiling than in the proceedings. The other three who'd be his jury, Mike noted, were just bearded patriarchs. It was hard to tell what went on behind their serene, calculating stares.

Mike Gentry took a deep breath.

"Do I get a lawyer?" he asked.

Saint Peter nodded. "Naturally there's always a prosecuting and a defending lawyer in trials such as this, Mike. It's your privilege to pick your own defense counsel after your record

"You mean you spiel my life history *before* the arguments start?" Mike Gentry asked.

"That's right," Saint Peter said. "Standard procedure up here." He looked down at a sheaf of papers before him. "Might as well begin right now," he declared. "We've got it all here, in black and white."

Mike Gentry realized that he had never felt so morally naked in all his life, and then remembered that, after all, he was no longer alive.

Gentry took a deep breath.

"Good ahead, shoot," he said.

Death Number Nine *tsked* disapproval at this lack of dignity, and at that instant, Saint Peter cleared his throat and began to read from the record of Mike Gentry's life. . . .

CHAPTER VII

"It's a Bum Rap!"

WHILE Mike Gentry fell under the spell of Saint Peter's excellent dramatic narrative basso, he returned, vicariously and nostalgically, to the days of his early childhood.

There was the orphanage where

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Mike had spent eight years until running away to begin his struggle with the world. And after that, there was the shining of shoes and the peddling of papers, the gnawing hunger in a grimy-faced kid's stomach that had made him steal that loaf of bread. He might have gone to reform school for that, if it hadn't been for Patrolman Patrick Flavin, who'd taken him under his wing protectingly and seen to it that little Mike Gentry got a job as a bellhop which would give him a room and food and clothes.

There was the wide-eyed admiration of the big shots who stayed in that hotel where the little eager-faced bellhop worked. There was the constant, keen-eyed observation on the part of the kid that had been Mike Gentry. Observation of the dress and speech and mannerisms of the wealthy and cultured who stopped at that hotel. Observation that became the only sort of schooling that taught him anything.

There was more, much more, about those early days, and Mike Gentry listened in fascination to instances he would never have recalled otherwise, but which now became crystal clear in his memory.

Then there was Mike Gentry's first glimpse of the man who was to become his symbol of glamour, power, affluence. A gambler, a handsome, wealthy, keen-eyed devil who tipped Mike Gentry with ten dollar bills, and who gave the worshiping bellhop his first tip on a horse race.

When Gentry had won half a year's salary on that race he'd needed nothing more to make up his mind on a career. He was sixteen when he set out on his own as a small fry gambler.

Recorded on Saint Peter's ledger was that scene with an irate Patrolman Pat Flavin who, on learning that punk Gentry was determined to be a gambler, had concluded a wrathful lecture with the words the kid would never forget.

"If that's what you're itching to be, I can't help you. But remember this, you punk Mike Gentry," Pat Flavin had said, "you'll be an honest gambler or none at all. If I'm ever hearing a shady word about Mike Gentry, I'll knock your head in with me own nightstick, personal, understand?"

There were the ups and the downs in the early years after that. Downs more than ups, as Mike Gentry served his apprenticeship in a trade of odds versus chance. Ups and downs that led all over the nation and finally all over the world, as the downs grew less and Mike Gentry rose from punk status to that of national gambling prominence.

Saint Peter's deep voice rolled on over these years long gone, lulling Mike Gentry into a hypnotic state of nostalgia, and gradually bringing the ledger closer and closer to the moment when Mike Gentry met death in the mouth of a darkened alleyway.

IT WAS over as abruptly as it had started, and Mike Gentry, still back in his own past, was jerked back to the present by Saint Peter's voice.

"Is that record correct to your knowledge, Mike Gentry? Is there anything that has been omitted, or anything inserted which is false?"

Mike Gentry blinked. "Huh?"

Saint Peter repeated the question.

Gentry shook his head in awe. "No. Nothing omitted. Good lord, I never had any idea that such a complete—"

"No one ever realizes that," Saint Peter broke in. "But you didn't answer the last part. Was anything false inserted in your record?"

Mike Gentry shook his head.

"Not a word," he declared,

"Then we can proceed with the

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trial," Saint Peter said. He spoke now to the six dignitaries flanking him on either side. Two of you will be selected as the defense and prosecution attorneys. The remaining four will sit in judgment, with me, on Mr. Gentry. You have all heard his life record, and I trust you will withhold judgment on the merits or evils of it until the case has been pled by both the defense and the prosecution."

There was a murmur of assent from the flowing-robed gentlemen flanking Saint Peter. Then Saint Peter turned his remarks back to Mike Gentry.

"You now have the privilege of choosing your defense lawyer, Michael Gentry," he said. "Any of the six men seated up here with me is capable of conducting a defense to your best interests. After you choose your own lawyer, I will then appoint another one from this group to conduct the prosecution. Please choose."

"Take your time," Death Number Nine whispered. "This is important."

Mike Gentry ran his hand through his straight dark hair, hunched his big shoulders forward in contemplation, put his chin in the palm of his hand, his elbow in the palm of the other hand.

For fully a minute Gentry stood there frowningly searching back and forth along the faces of the dignitaries on either side of Saint Peter.

"I kind of lean toward the guy with the gavel on the end," Gentry whispered behind his hand to Death Number Nine. "Except that I'd like to keep him on the jury."

"The redheaded one is a good bet," Death Number Nine said out of the corner of his mouth. "He's had quite a bit of success with clients lately. Persuasive in debate."

"That right?" Gentry whispered.

"I wouldn't tell you wrong," Death Number Nine muttered softly.

Mike Gentry made up his mind.

"I will choose as my counsel the redheaded dignitary sitting to your right, Saint Peter," Gentry said.

Saint Peter smiled, as if approving of the choice as wise.

"Very well, Michael Gentry." Then he leaned to his right and addressed the one Gentry had chosen. "Angel Donald, you have been selected to act as Defense Counsel for Mr. Gentry."

THE redhead, called Angel Donald, had been happily contemplating the ceiling, and didn't hear Saint Peter's first summons. The Saint repeated it again, sharply.

Angel Donald removed his contemplation from the ceiling and turned bland eyes on Saint Peter.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

Saint Peter repeated himself for the third time. Gentry had sudden qualms about his choice. But then Angel Donald smiled down at him and rose.

"Thank you for the honor of your choice," he said. "Supposing we retire to the ante chamber for a brief discussion of our plea?"

Mike Gentry looked doubtfully at Death Number Nine.

"It's customary," Death Number Nine whispered. "Give you time to work up a brief defense strategy. Go ahead."

Young, redheaded Angel Donald was coming down from the dais and starting toward a door at the side of the room. Death Number Nine pushed Mike Gentry gently in this direction.

"Follow him," he hissed.

"I'm beginning to have my doubts about that one," Gentry whispered uneasily. "He's too starry-eyed to suit me."

"He's deep," Death Number Nine hissed reassuringly, "that's why he seems vague."

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Saint Peter broke in now.

"Don't you think you'd better join your counsel in the ante chamber for a discussion of your case, Mike?" he asked.

Mike Gentry took a deep breath, nodding, and turned to follow the redheaded Angel Donald to the ante chamber.

"Now then," said Angel Donald, when he'd closed the door of the tiny ante chamber behind them, "we'd better get this defense straight. There might be a chance to save you from Hell if we play our cards smartly."

Mike Gentry was open-mouthed in consternation.

"*Might* be a chance!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean, *might?*"

Redheaded young Angel Donald seemed mildly surprised.

"Aren't you aware of the spot you're in?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

"I am not!" Mike Gentry exclaimed indignantly. "What have I done to face a rap like Hell?"

"Why," said the Angel Donald, spreading his hands in a gesture pleading for reason, "the very fact that your entire life has been devoted to the vice of gambling is, in itself, going to be very hard to explain."

"What's wrong with gambling?" Gentry demanded.

"That," said Angel Donald, growing dreamy-eyed once more, "is not the point at all. You see, we'll have to prove what's *right* with gambling, and I'm afraid that's impossible." He paused to contemplate the ceiling. "You see," he went on, "most people facing a hearing here stand or fail on the good they've done in their lives. If the good they've done outweighs the bad they've done, they stand a good chance to get through. But if it's the other way around—" Angel Donald let the sentence trail off meaningly.

"But listen," Mike Gentry protested. "You heard Saint Peter's recital of my record. Wasn't it a pretty good one, considering I began with the odds all against me?"

THE Angel Donald shrugged. "It had its Horatio Algerish points, to be sure," he admitted. "From rags to riches, and all that. But the point is that you rose from rags to gambling notoriety. Now, if you'd risen to be a captain of industry or something like that, it would be different. Can't you understand?"

"No," said Gentry flatly. "I don't understand at all. There's nothing in my past that I'm particularly ashamed of, and—"

But Angel Donald hadn't been listening, and now he cut Gentry off in midsentence, snapping his fingers excitedly.

"I've got it!" Angel Donald exclaimed.

"Got what?" Gentry frowned irritably.

"Your defense, of course," said the Angel Donald. "We'll hit home hard on the fact that you never had much chance in life, never had the opportunities others had, for example. We'll play up your orphanage, the peddling papers, shining shoes and all that. We'll point out the fact that you did well not to become a murderer, gangster, or common thief!"

"Now, wait a minute—" Mike Gentry began.

But the Angel Donald was going on with increased enthusiasm now. His face shone delightedly as he continued to paint word pictures of the hardship and struggle in his client's early youth.

"Just a minute—" Gentry protested again.

"And we'll wind it all up with a dramatic plea in which you throw yourself and your misguided past on the

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mercy and kindness of the court!" the Angel Donald concluded estatically. "That's my forte, pleas of that nature. I've pushed through plenty of borderline cases that way."

"But, listen—" Mike Gentry tried once more.

The Angel Donald wasn't listening. He threw an arm affectionately around Mike's shoulder.

"That'll be the line of our case," he said enthusiastically. "Don't worry about a thing. You'll have a fifty-fifty chance to beat Hell, at least!"

Mike Gentry's lips went tight in anger, his eyes flashing indignantly.

"We'll see what my chances will be," he said quietly. "If you ask me, Angel Donald, I'm facing a bum rap!"

The Angel Donald, not recognizing Gentry's boiling point, naturally enough, merely smiled vaguely and nodded. It was obvious that he was already holding a mental rehearsal of a stirring jury plea based on strong emotional appeal. And it was also obvious that he anticipated the coming trial happily . . .

CHAPTER VIII

"Who Says I'm Sorry?"

WHEN the quietly fuming Mike Gentry reentered the courtroom with his defense counsel, Angel Donald, he was greeted with the sight of the gouty-looking, thin-nosed, sour old graybeard who'd been sitting by the gavel-wielding dignitary. He was standing before the dais a few feet from Death Number Nine, waiting patiently, all too patiently.

Saint Peter identified the sour-looking dignitary.

"I have chosen Angel Horatio, here, to conduct the prosecution of this trial," Saint Peter explained, pointing down to the gouty-looking graybeard. "While you and your counsel were out preparing defense, Angel Horatio had compiled his side of the case. The trial can therefore now begin."

Gentry saw, with faint surprise, that chairs had been placed on the floor below the dais, and the Angel Donald now led him over to a pair of them, as prosecuting Angel Horatio cleared his throat, glared balefully at Mike Gentry, and opened his attack.

Angel Horatio, Gentry found out in less than a minute, had a voice that was as acidulous as his appearance.

"I move," Angel Horatio's first words were, "that this trial be instantly dismissed as beneath the time and dignity of this court. I further move that Mr. Gentry be cast directly into Hell, where he most certainly belongs."

"I object!" shouted Angel Donald with alacrity that was pleasantly surprising to Gentry. Then the Angel Donald added: "On the grounds that is has not yet been proven that Mr. Gentry belongs in Hell."

Saint Peter cleared his throat.

"Objection sustained," he said. "Movement offered by the prosecuting counsel is overruled as considerably premature. Please proceed, Angel Horatio, with your arguments."

The Angel Horatio nodded, unperturbed, as if he had expected what had happened and thought nothing of it.

The life history of this man Michael Gentry has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt," Angel Horatio resumed, "that the fact that vice and criminal pastimes were not only tolerated by him, but seized upon as a means of livelihood, is of primary importance in my case, and a factor that cannot at any time be disregarded by the jury during the pleas of the defense." Angel Horatio paused to let this sink in. Then he went on. "I submit, further-

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more, that, even though his early youth was one of considerable hardship, many other men faced with the same struggle succeeded in besting their environment and emerging unsullied by it. I submit that Michael Gentry had the same chance as other men of scant opportunity to make something of his life, and that, unlike other men, he took the easy, the insidious, the sullied course of professional gambling. On that basis—" and here Angel Horatio smirked triumphantly at his rival, Angel Donald, "—we can disregard what will obviously be the plea of the defense, namely, lack of opportunity"!

Mike Gentry shot a quick glance at his counsel, Angel Donald. But the young, redheaded, snub-nosed angel seemed scarcely listening to his opponent. He was gazing serenely at the ceiling. Gentry felt slightly sick.

"And lastly, in this brief argument," concluded Angel Horatio, "I submit that we are all aware of the heinous nature of gambling, of the chaos and despair it has brought the world of foolish, groping humanity. I submit that Michael Gentry, as a professional gambler, must be held responsible—along with the rest of his ilk—for much of the misery among his fellow creatures today. And, because of these coldly logical, indisputably sound arguments, I request a verdict committing Michael Gentry, gambler and wastrel, to the fires of Hell!"

ANGEL HORATIO wheeled with the last words from his acid tongue, pointing dramatically at Mike Gentry. There was a murmur from the dignitaries seated on either side of Saint Peter. A murmur that sounded far too agreeing to Gentry.

"Are you still sticking to your original line of defense?" Gentry hissed shakenly to the Angel Donald.

His counsel looked surprised. "Of course," he said. "It will make a splendid case."

Mike Gentry's rage and indignation returned to him in a swift, sweeping wave.

"Not to my mind, brother!" he snapped. And then, without quite being conscious of what he intended to do, Mike Gentry found himself on his feet and striding toward the place just vacated by Angel Horatio.

There was a shocked exclamation from everyone in the court except Saint Peter. Then Mike Gentry was holding the floor, the center of all eyes, staring up at Saint Peter and the four others who held his eternal fate in their hands.

"If you don't mind," Gentry said, "I'd like to throw out my lawyer and conduct my own defense."

"That's unheard of!" It was Angel Horatio who protested.

Saint Peter, eyes twinkling, shook his head.

"It is entirely permissible. Go right ahead, Mike. Conduct your own case as you see fit, if you'd rather," he said.

Mike Gentry cleared his throat and glared around him.

"There's a few things I want to make clear right now," he began. "The first is that I don't deny I was a gambler, and I am not sorry or ashamed about it. I'll get back to that point later. Secondly, you all seem to forget one fact in my life history, and that's the manner in which I died. You forget that I didn't come here through an accident, or my own fault, or old age, or any of those things. I didn't have a lot to say about it, since I was murdered. I'll touch on that a little more later on, too."

Mike Gentry dug his hands into his pockets, spreading his legs wide in a fighting stance, head slightly lowered, glaring around the court.

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"I don't make any squawk about not having had a chance when I was a kid," he said. "Maybe I didn't have everything that a lot of other kids did, but, looking back on it, I didn't know the difference, didn't know what I was missing, or supposed to be missing, as so I never had any squawks. I enjoyed my childhood, and I wouldn't trade it in a million years, tough as it was. So eliminate that angle. I don't want that kind of hogwash sympathy.

"Now," he continued, "about that gambling angle. Sure I was a gambler. I still am. But get this straight. When I gambled, it was with other professionals. I never clipped sparrows, or stole from kids, or ran gambling joints that took dough from people who couldn't afford to lose it. You find any of that dirt on my record, and I'll eat it. I never turned a dishonest card. I never threw a loaded pair of dice. I gambled, but I played it straight, and clean, and smart, understand? I'm damned proud of the way I played it, as a matter of fact."

MIKE GENTRY paused a moment, peering upward belligerently to see how his audience was taking it. He found it impossible to tell. Only Saint Peter seemed on one side or another, and Gentry had felt he could count on him all along.

Clearing his throat, Gentry barged on. "Maybe I've never done anything wonderful. Maybe I'm not good enough to get into your Heaven. But by the same token, in all honesty, you can't say I'm bad enough to deserve Hell. I've never knowingly stepped on anyone's fingers at any time in my life. I've lived and let live and gone my own way in my own racket. And then what happened to me. I was murdered! I was shot down like a dog in an alley without even a chance to find out who the skunk was who did it!"

Saint Peter broke in, gently.

"And what do you figure it all adds up to, Mike?" he asked.

"Just this," Gentry said. "I've been given a bum deal all around. The deck was marked, and it's even more marked if you can sit around here and talk about tossing me into Hell. Does it sound just to you, Saint Peter? Does it sound like a clean deal?"

With this, Angel Horatio leaped again to his feet irately.

"I object!" he said. "The question put by the defendant to the Court is totally out of keeping with formal procedure!"

Saint Peter frowned slightly at Angel Horatio.

"The question, like the defendant's declarations, is rather interesting to this Court. It shall be answered." Saint Peter turned to Gentry, smiling slightly. "You want to know if it sounds like a fair deal to me, is that right, Mike?"

Gentry nodded. "That's right."

Saint Peter tugged reflectively at his black beard, as if mentally phrasing his answer.

"I will grant you, Mike, that there's some justice in your thinking that it isn't fair. But you'll have to remember that your case is one of the most singularly unusual ones tried before this Court in some time. Incidentally, what would you consider to be a fair deal on your hearing here?"

Mike Gentry cleared his throat, he seemed to set himself more solidly, as if readying for a physical rebuff to his declaration.

"I agree on one thing only," Gentry said. "I agree that maybe I'm not good enough for Heaven. But I'm not deserving Hell, and that's a fact. I think I was snatched up here too soon. I think, to make the deal fair, you

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shouldda waited until I'd done something in my life either really good or bad. I think you ought to toss me back into the pond, like a fish that's too short to pass the game laws. That's my idea on this."

Angel Horatio not only rose in protest this time; he dashed to Gentry's side and shouted his shocked astonishment.

"I protest. I protest most vehemently the brazen effrontery of this tinhorn gambler to make such a statement before this Court!"

Gentry glared at Angel Horatio.

"What's wrong with it?" he demanded.

The Angel Horatio ignored Gentry, and answered him through a direct, indignant appeal to Saint Peter.

"Such a plea is positively unheard of. It is shockingly in bad taste. It is utterly preposterous!"

SAINT PETER hid a grin behind the palm of his hand, pretending to stroke his black beard. His eyes went questioningly to Mike Gentry, as if hoping that the sparks between Gentry and Angel Horatio would not stop now.

Gentry did not disappoint the Saint.

"The only thing you got against me is that I'm a gambler!" Gentry told Angel Horatio. "And my record will be proof enough to back up all the statements I made about the kind of gambling I did. The records'll show it was all straight. I never took a dime of dirty money!" He paused, then added: "Are you afraid to give me a chance, is that it?"

Angel Horatio began to splutter. Then Saint Peter took over.

"So that's your idea, eh Mike?" he smiled. "You think we ought to toss you back like a fish under game-law length, eh? You think we ought to give you a crack at doing something either good or bad, eh?"

"I do," said Mike Gentry positively.

"Angel Horatio was right when he said such a move would be unheard of, Mike," Saint Peter said. "It would be positively an admission of confusion on our part. But—" he hesitated.

Angel Horatio leaped into this moment of indecision with both fists.

"Surely this Court is not for an instant tempted to grant such a preposterous request!" he exclaimed aghast. "Why, this person Gentry stands convicted by his own admission of never having done anything of good—"

Saint Peter cut him off.

"But he has never done anything bad, Angel Horatio, please keep that in mind," he said. He half closed his eyes. "I feel somehow that perhaps this request is not so presumptuous as it sounds. In fact, I wonder—"

It was Angel Horatio's turn to interrupt. He did so swiftly, desperately.

"This man Gentry was not even worthy enough to gain the love of his fellow human beings, Saint Peter!" Horatio protested. "He could not number those who loved him on three fingers. He—"

Mike Gentry broke in, now, angrily.

"Lots of people thought I was okay," he said. "Ask anyone in that town what they think of Mike Gentry. Why, all you have to do is—"

Saint Peter rejoined the conflict, cutting Mike off.

"That's it!" Saint Peter exclaimed. "That would do it quite fairly, I think!"

Both Gentry and the Angel Horatio looked bewilderedly at the presiding Saint, who elaborated eagerly, pleased with his idea.

"It would take months, perhaps years, for Gentry to come forth with a really good or bad act on which we

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could sentence him justly," the Saint declared. "Angel Horatio is right. It would be preposterous to return Mike Gentry to the world until he is satisfied with those conditions. However, on the second point raised by Angel Horatio, that of the love or lack of love which Mike Gentry must certainly have raised, or failed to raise, in his fellow human beings, we have an interesting experiment!"

"I don't get it," Mike Gentry said.

"Nor I," declared Angel Horatio suspiciously.

"Why, it's crystal clear," Saint Peter said. "If Gentry could prove to the satisfaction of this Court that, say, three people he left behind him in life were so influenced by the good in him to love him honestly—he should most certainly deserve Heaven."

"But he can't prove it!" snapped Angel Horatio triumphantly. "He can't prove it, because he couldn't find even three people who loved him with honesty, without reservation!"

MIKE GENTRY saw his opening. "Give me the chance, and I can!" he snapped. "Send me back for three weeks and I'll have the whole town hanging out flags for me to prove it!"

Saint Peter suddenly sighed. He shook his head regretfully.

"No, Mike. I'm sorry. That's out. It would have made a darned interesting experiment, though. But we can't send you back."

"Why not?" Gentry demanded.

"It just isn't done," said Saint Peter.

"For two weeks," Mike begged.

Saint Peter shook his head firmly. "No, Mike. Not a chance. I'm sorry."

"A week!" Mike exclaimed desperately. "Just seven days. What could you lose? You'd have your finger on me. I couldn't skip out on you."

Angel Horatio broke in. "I move that this ridiculous discussion cease, and that the defendant either resume his own defense or rest his case."

Mike Gentry glared at the interruption, and spoke again to Saint Peter.

"Three days!" he implored.

"No, Mike."

"Two days," Gentry begged hoarsely. "Just forty-eight hours. Surely, you —"

Saint Peter cut him off. "No, Mike. No dice. I'm sorry."

"No dice, eh?" Gentry said softly. And then a quick gleam came to his eyes. His hand went suddenly to his pocket.

"I move —" Angel Horatio began plaintively.

Mike Gentry cut him off. "Listen, Saint Peter," he said quickly, urgently. "I'm going to stand or fall on my gambling background, isn't that right?"

Saint Peter nodded. "I'm afraid that's so, Mike. Especially since we can't judge you by anything else."

"Then you can't, in all fairness, refuse me a chance to bring gambling into the decision to help my side of the case, can you?" Gentry demanded.

"Of course not."

Mike Gentry took his hand from his pocket, smiling triumphantly. He held it, palm open, out toward Saint Peter. The cheap dice he'd taken from the urchins lay there.

"How about it, then?" Gentry demanded. "How about a chance to roll for that forty-eight hour furlough? How about giving me a gambling chance to have forty-eight hours in which to find those three people Angel Horatio claims don't exist—three people who love me?"

Beside Gentry, Angel Horatio drew in his breath in shocked horror.

There was a cold silence, while Saint Peter stared almost unbelievingly at

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the dice in Gentry's palm.

Mike Gentry drove on, quickly, trying to clinch his desperate request.

"You said it would make an interesting experiment," Gentry reminded Saint Peter. "Well, here's a chance to play fair with me, and at the same time possibly see that experiment go through. If I lose, then no furlough, and I'll feel at least that I've had a square chance from this Court. And if I win, you don't lose anything, and you'll get that chance to see the experiment put to a test. What do you say?"

"Let me see those cubes, Mike," Saint Peter said suddenly, his grin flashing.

MIKE GENTRY handed the dice to Saint Peter, and the latter turned them over in his big, strong, well formed hands curiously, smilingly. He looked up after a minute, addressing Gentry.

"You understand, Mike, that we haven't convicted you as yet? You understand that you might have a chance at Heaven anyway, if this trial proceeds as before? And do you understand that if you take Angel Horatio up on that angle of finding three people who love you, and fail, you haven't a chance of anything but conviction before this court?"

Mike Gentry nodded. "I figured that," he said. "I understand."

"Let me warn you, too, that my experience has proven that many people think they are loved but are not really so. For one mortal to find three people who love him is not an easy task, I assure you. Do you realize that?"

Mike Gentry nodded.

"And under the circumstances I've outlined, you still want a chance to gamble for a forty-eight hour furlough back in the world of the living?"

"You bet," Gentry declared firmly.

Saint Peter leaned forward, handing the dice back to Mike Gentry.

"Okay, Mike. You'll have your chance. But if you roll these dice and lose, or even if you roll them and win but fail on your furlough, there'll be no more complaints about a bum deal, right?"

"Right," promised Mike Gentry, taking the dice eagerly.

Angel Horatio finally found voice.

"This—this is preposterous!" he croaked weakly.

Saint Peter glanced at him archly.

"Don't forget your position, Angel Horatio," he warned. "You were merely selected as Prosecuting Counsel. I'm still running this Court." Saint Peter turned back to Gentry. "All right, Mike. Toss 'em. I understand the, ah, humph, rudiments of the game of dice, so you don't have to explain."

Mike Gentry grinned, raising the dice cupped in his right hand. He turned his grin tauntingly to the benumbed Angel Horatio as he rattled the cubes in preliminary.

Then Gentry crouched swiftly, spinning the cubes out of his palm across the marble floor. They stopped some five feet from the left edge of the dais.

Saint Peter rose, leaning forward and peering down at the dice. His expression was one of wondering amazement.

"Well, I'll be—" he began.

"Uh, uh!" Gentry warned, grinning.

The cubes read four and three. Seven.

"A natural!" Saint Peter gasped, and sat back heavily.

"I win the chance," said Mike Gentry.

"There's no denying that," Saint Peter admitted.

"This is terrible!" Angel Horatio moaned shudderingly.

Mike Gentry stepped over and

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picked up the dice, dropping them into his pocket. He turned back to Angel Horatio.

"Like Hell it is," Gentry declared.

Saint Peter's grin was vast. He beckoned to Death Number Nine.

"Escort Mr. Gentry back to the world of the living, Death Number Nine, according to the terms of our agreement," Saint Peter said. . . .

CHAPTER IX

"Hello, World!"

MIKE GENTRY and Death Number Nine stood at the borderline of shadows between Life and Eternity. Gentry's escort, who had been wordless from the time they'd left the huge marble hallway, finally cleared his throat and spoke.

"It's for forty-eight hours, Gentry," Death Number Nine declared. "No longer. I'll be waiting for you at the end of that time. And, ah, incidentally, I don't mind telling you that you succeeded in doing the impossible in getting this crazy furlough."

"Don't you like it?" Gentry asked.

Death Number Nine shrugged. "It's none of my business," he said. "I don't care one way or another. After all, I don't work on commission, you know."

Mike Gentry laughed. "That's very droll."

"Another thing," said Death Number Nine. "I might as well warn you that the circumstances of your return when you step through these shadows back into the world of the living, will be somewhat hard to get used to at first."

Mike Gentry frowned in sudden suspicion.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Well, you'll still be dead, for one thing, as far as everyone in the world of the living is concerned."

"I don't get it," Gentry said. "How can I be both dead and back there?"

"Your body will be dead," Death Number Nine said. "That can't be changed. So, because of that, you'll find yourself in another body."

Gentry's jaw went agape.

"What!"

Death Number Nine nodded. "That's right. So you see, you'll have quite a time of it getting proof that three people love you."

"Why," Gentry exploded, "this is a lousy gip! How can I operate in such a short time as forty-eight hours when I won't even have my own body?"

"That's up to you," said Death Number Nine. "After all, the only thing Saint Peter promised in your bargain was that you'd be permitted to return. He didn't say how."

"But good gods!" Gentry exploded again. "No one will know me from Adam. It'll be impos—"

Death Number Nine cut him off.

"Those who love you will know you," he said quietly. "For after all, your body is just a shell. *You'll* still shine through to the ones who really love you, no matter what body you're wearing."

The expression on Gentry's face suddenly changed. A curious gleam came to his eyes. A look almost akin to satisfaction.

"Maybe that won't be so bad at that," he said softly, as if to himself. "Maybe it'll be an additional break."

"And one last thing," said Death Number Nine. "I wouldn't feel so smug, if I were you. Saint Peter knows exactly why you wanted that furlough."

"Huh?" Gentry blinked.

DEATH Number Nine nodded. "That find-three-people-who-love you stuff didn't fool him, Gentry. He

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knows you wanted this furlough just to get the person who murdered you."

Mike Gentry looked incredulous. "He knew all along?"

"That's right," said Death Number Nine. "But if I were you, I'd keep one thing in mind. The bargain was made on the basis of finding three people who love you. Saint Peter will hold you to that bargain. If you spend your forty-eight hours trying to track down and shoot holes into the person who murdered you, you might miss the boat completely on the terms of the bargain. You'd regret it for the rest of Eternity if you did."

Mike Gentry didn't speak. He rubbed his hand along his chin bewilderedly.

"You see, Gentry," Death Number Nine concluded, "you're going to have an almost impossible job finding three people with that regard for you. And if you don't succeed in doing so, again let me remind you, it will be too bad!"

"But—" Mike Gentry began. And at that instant the shadows around them became mists that shrouded Death Number Nine completely, whirling wraith-like before Gentry's eyes.

"Death Number Nine!" Gentry called.

There was no answer. The mists swirled more swiftly, blinding Mike Gentry.

"Death Number Nine, wait!" Gentry called again. But the mists blanketed all sound, all seeing, all sensation. They swirled swiftly and even more swiftly over Gentry. He had a sudden feeling of overpowering drowsiness. There were sounds, vaguely familiar, swirling around and around in his swiftly ebbing consciousness. . . .

MIKE GENTRY had no way of knowing how much time had passed between his loss of consciousness there in the shadowland between Life and Eternity and his sudden awakening in the world of the living.

It was as if he'd been jarred from a brief sleep.

Blinking, he opened his eyes, looking around in surprise.

He sat in a doorway fronting an unused store on a darkened side street. The sound of traffic from a nearby boulevard came to his ears and the constant background noises of a big city, partly asleep and partly at play, was familiarly present.

Mike Gentry climbed to his feet, unconsciously brushing his clothing as he did so. And then he remembered.

Swiftly, Gentry stepped around to the black, shining surface of the big plate-glass store window.

It provided a practically perfect mirror in which to survey the reflection of his strange new body.

For fully a minute, Mike Gentry stared at his reflection wonderingly. Stared at the reflection of a man several inches shorter than the other Gentry. A man whose shoulders were bulkier than the other Gentry's had been. A man whose coloring was lighter, whose features were a trifle thicker, almost brutal. A man dressed in a cheap, tight-fitting blue serge suit. A man who looked like a movie version of a yegg, a torpedo, a gunman.

Then Gentry laughed, harshly, uncontrollably.

He could not have been given a more ironically suitable body for the role that lay ahead of him in the next forty-eight hours.

"This is rich," Gentry muttered to himself, when his laughter died. "This is a scream. Mike Gentry, gentleman gambler, back in the role of hood and gangster."

Then Gentry saw that a cheap, black fedora lay in the doorway where he'd been sitting. He stepped over, picking

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it up, placing it on his head. He pulled the brim down slightly over his eyes, fishing automatically in the pockets of his cheap suit for a cigarette.

He found a pack, battered, dried, and some matches. He lighted a cigarette flicked the match away, pulled his cheap fedora even lower over his eyes, and turned up the street in the direction of the main night club stem.

Gentry walked for over fifteen minutes before he reached the Panther Club. And then he didn't go inside. He walked on past it, keenly surveying the laughing crowd of swankily attired customers who emerged as he strolled by.

Gentry saw a clock in the window of a large store across the street. It was close to five in the morning. The crowds coming out of the Panther now would be the tail-enders, even though the night club seldom closed doors until six or so.

Gentry frowned. It had seemed to him as if innumerable hours had passed while he'd been in Eternity. But in the reckoning of time in this world, it hadn't been longer than two.

He crossed the street and walked back in the direction of the Panther Club from this less proximate viewpoint. Directly across from the club, he paused, finding another cigarette and lighting it deliberately. Across the flame he squinted narrowly at the big black limousine that was pulling up before the doorway of the night club.

Tossing the match away, Gentry saw the gilded doorman hurry to open the doors of the machine. It was Curtis Frazier's super-de luxe buggy. And Curtis Frazier climbed out, followed by the tall, unmistakable figure of Luke Henchley.

GENTRY stood motionless, watching the pair enter the night club. Then he turned away and walked down to the end of the block where a forlorn newsie was hawking papers to the remaining stragglers of the section's nightclub crowd.

He found some change in his pockets, gave the kid a nickel, and walked over to a street lamp with the paper.

If the news had been picked up at all it would have a prominent place on the front pages, Gentry realized dryly. But there was nothing in the papers about it.

Mike Gentry hadn't been discovered yet in that alley. Or, at least, his body hadn't.

Gentry folded the paper and walked back to the corner, handing it to the surprised newsie. Then he crossed the street to the side on which the Panther Club was located, swung right, and headed directly for the nitery.

At the doorway, just as he had expected, the loudly uniformed first doorman refused him admittance after a quick survey of his appearance.

"This isn't any place for you, pal, run along," the doorman said. He put one hand firmly on Gentry's arm, starting to steer him away.

"I'm looking for a couple of guys I gotta see. It's important," Gentry said.

"No one in here you'd know, buddy. Get on, now," the doorman said hostilely.

"I'm looking for Curtis Frazier and Luke Henchley," Gentry said. "It's damned important to them that I see 'em."

The doorman, still obviously hostile, hesitated at those names.

"Perhaps you'd better tell 'em I want to see 'em," Gentry suggested. "Or send the word in. They'll be glad to see me, when you tell 'em I got news about a pal of theirs, Mike Gentry."

The doorman released his grasp on Gentry's arm. He glared darkly.

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"You'd better be right, buddy. 'Cause if they don't wanta see you, you'll wish you hadn't asked." He turned away, then turned back. "What's your name?" he asked.

Mike Gentry thought.

"Joe," he said at last. "Joe Brock."

The doorman's suspicion was even more aroused by this. But he turned away, stepping into the first foyer of the club and passing the information and request on to the second doorman to be further relayed. Then he returned to Gentry's side.

"You'd better be telling the truth, pal," he said. "We don't go for jokes around here."

Mike Gentry took a deep draught from his cigarette, exhaling the smoke directly into the doorman's face.

"Why—!" the doorman grated.

Gentry's hand slipped swiftly, significantly, to his coat pocket. The doorman caught the gesture and paled.

"Take it easy, Napoleon," Gentry urged, withdrawing his hand from the pocket again.

IT WAS then that the page boy stepped out into the street.

He called to the doorman.

"Where's the guy who wants to see Mr. Frazier?" he asked.

The doorman pointed dubiously to Gentry.

"Follow me," said the page boy.

Gentry leered at the doorman and followed after the boy into the first foyer. Here, as he expected they would, they turned off sharply, ignoring the second and pretentious foyer and following a narrow hallway to a door some forty feet away.

The door was thick, oak-paneled, important-looking. It led directly into Curtis Frazier's private offices, as Gentry well knew. The page boy pressed a buzzer and stepped back.

In an instant, Gentry knew, there would be a *click* from an electric button inside to release the lock on the door. Then he would step into the swank private offices of Curtis Frazier.

Gentry wet his lips. He didn't know what this was going to lead to. He wasn't even certain—except for Frazier's strange connection with the crook gambler Henchley—that he was starting his murderer's track-down with the right angle. But he felt fairly certain of at least one thing. Whatever happened in the next minutes would, in some fashion, narrow down his lists of possible suspects.

Mike Gentry heard the *click* then, releasing the lock. And it was followed by a voice, Frazier's voice, calling for him to enter. . . .

CHAPTER X

"You Wouldn't Know Me"

MIKE GENTRY was scarcely conscious of the fact that the page boy had vanished on the heels of Frazier's voice. He was conscious only of the fact that the door had been opened from the inside, and that he faced the luxurious surroundings of a movie-style office in which Curtis Frazier, dapper, sharp featured, moustached, sat nervously atop a solid mahogany desk—and that Luke Henchley, tall, bald, skinny and sour-looking, had opened the door and now stood beside it with a pistol in his hand. A pistol trained on Gentry.

"Put up your mitts," Luke Henchley ordered.

Mike Gentry did so, raising his hands above his head. Then Henchley stepped forward and frisked him with quick, practiced dexterity.

Finishing the frisking, Henchley frowned. He spoke for Frazier's bene-

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fit as well as Gentry's, and his voice was suspicious and puzzled.

"The doorman called in that you were carrying a blaster, guy. What goes? Where'd you ditch it?"

"Can I give my arms a rest?" Gentry asked.

Henchley nodded sourly, and Gentry dropped his arms to his side.

"I reached into my pocket and made out like I was lugging a popgun. I didn't like that doorman's attitude," Gentry explained.

Henchley considered this sourly.

"A funny man, huh?" he said.

Gentry shrugged. "That ain't why I'm here."

"You said outside that your handle was Joe Brock," Henchley said. "Was that funny stuff, too?"

"I've had a lot of handles," Gentry said. "In lots of places, too."

"Such as?" Henchley asked.

Gentry shrugged e l a b o r a t e l y. "Frisco, last. Before that, Chicago. Before that, Miami. What the hell's the matter?"

IT WAS then that Frazier rose from the desk and entered the interrogation.

"Let me talk to him, Luke," Frazier said. Then, to Gentry, he said "Okay. You say your name's Joe Brock. Outside you told the doorman that you had some news about a friend of mine, Mike Gentry. What do you know about Gentry, and what's this all about?"

"I understand," Gentry declared, choosing his words with care, "that something happened to Mike Gentry tonight. I understand he got into some trouble, some shooting trouble. I understand he got hurt bad."

Gentry had been watching narrowly for any betrayal of expression on the faces of Frazier or Henchley. And he was disappointed. Frazier merely stared at him narrowly in a fashion that could mean anything from disbelief to sharp suspicion. Luke Henchley's face was as sourly wooden as before.

"And how do you understand that?" Luke Henchley asked quietly.

"I heard it," Gentry said.

Frazier shot Henchley an unfathomable glance. Then he turned back to Gentry.

"You must be out of your mind. Who'd want to shoot Mike Gentry in this town?" Frazier asked.

"He won a lot of money early this ayem in a poker game, I understand," Gentry answered.

"Yeah, but he didn't carry it," Luke Henchley said tonelessly. "There'd be no reason to plug a guy if he didn't have that dough with him."

"I don't think this was meant to be robbery," Gentry said.

"What do you think it was meant to be?" Frazier asked. A sudden flicker that might possibly have been fear came to his eyes.

Gentry shrugged. "I figure it might have been anything. And I figure, too, that it might have been none of my business, see?"

"No," Frazier said flatly. "No. I don't see."

"I just blew in tonight, on the rails. I'm down on my uppers," said Gentry. "What I found out I got by accident. But that ain't the point. You'll need a good torpedo with a smart head and a sealed yap around here, now that Mike Gentry has been—"

"Been what?" Frazier demanded.

Again Gentry made his shrug casual. "Been too much in the way for some people to stand any longer. You got a big fast club here, and you can use a willing lug like me around." He turned to Henchley. "Don't you get

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the idea?"

Luke Henchley stared hard at Gentry for fully a minute. Then he answered.

"You say you blew in on the rails, and that you're down on your luck and looking for a spot. Anybody who knows you see you when you came in?"

"Nobody in this burg knows me," said Gentry.

Henchley looked sharply at Frazier, then back to Gentry.

"You sure you're not beating out some rap in some other town?" Henchley asked.

Gentry grinned crookedly. "None that need worry you guys," he said. "You wouldn't know me!"

Henchley turned to Frazier. "Come on into the other room a minute. I want to talk to you."

Frazier looked puzzled, but turned and followed after Henchley as the tall raw-boned gambler crossed the room to a door in the far corner. The pair stepped through this, and the door closed behind them.

MIKE GENTRY, eyes narrowed, stood motionless where they'd left him. Desperately he tried to figure out the strange angles to their behavior. He would have risked a fortune on the hunch that he'd stumbled immediately onto information directly tied in with his murder. But yet, there was a chance that—

Henchley and Frazier came back into the room.

It was Henchley who did the talking.

"We think we can use you, Brock. We're planning on adding a big gambling plant to this club in order to make it pay off the way it should. We'll need a few mugs like you around."

Mike Gentry tried to keep the surprise from his eyes. This, then was the explanation for the familiarity between Henchley and Frazier! The crooked gambler had been persuading the weak-willed night club operator to open up gambling floors, with Henchley, undoubtedly, in supervision

But Henchley, still talking, crossed the room to Gentry's side at that instant.

"We'll give you a stake to carry you over for a couple of weeks while we get things set," Henchley was saying.

And then it happened, catching Mike Gentry completely off guard. The big, skinny gambler had had his right hand in the pocket of his dinner jacket casually as he'd approached Gentry. And with quick, deadly timing as he stepped beside him, brought forth his pistol in an uninterrupted arc, smashing it down on Gentry's skull!

Everything cosmic exploded in Mike Gentry's skull. Blackness, flecked with showering sparks of swift, sickening pain, descended as he fell face forward to the floor. And then he knew no more. . . .

IT WAS raining, and the downpour washed the muddy waters of the alley into the gash on Mike Gentry's skull. Gentry stirred slightly, groaning, and the rain slashed down on his face. The shrill scream in the back of his shuttered consciousness grew more and more insistent.

Gentry opened his eyes dazedly, uncomprehendingly, blinking away the mud and rain. He felt something hard and cold in his right hand, and the stink of creosite was faint on his shoulder. Then he realized that he lay in the mud of the alley.

And then he became aware, dully, of the meaning of the shrill insistent scream. For it was louder, much louder, and considerably nearer now, drawing nearer every second.

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Police sirens!

Instinctively, Mike Gentry tried to rise to his feet. But he was only able to lift himself to one elbow. He fell weakly back into the mire of the alley.

The sirens were much louder now, scarce blocks away.

Gentry shook his head, trying to clear it of the fog. The effort was agony, and he clenched his teeth against it.

And then Gentry remembered. Remembered Henchley, and the gun, and Frazier's grinning face as he had toppled to the floor. He cursed thickly, spitting the alley ooze from his teeth, and tried to rise again.

It was then that Gentry saw what he'd had clenched in his right fist. It was a pistol, an automatic.

Teetering there in the mire, leaning on his elbow, Gentry stared stupidly at the weapon.

The shrill wail of the police sirens, blotted from his mind momentarily by the sight of the gun in his hand, now returned to his consciousness loudly, frighteningly.

Mike Gentry had a wild impulse to rise and flee. And though his tortured body tried to obey the commands of this frantic impulse, he was not equal to it. His legs seemed numbed, his arms helplessly weak, his mind still dazed. Every effort he made to get to his feet resulted in the same swift stabbing vertigo, the nauseating rebellion of a beaten body unable to respond to the stabbing commands of will.

And then the police prowl cars, sirens still moaning in both of them, swung down the alley in which Mike Gentry lay.

The bobbing fingers of their spotlights caught him in a white, merciless glare an instant later. Mike Gentry, still trying to rise, cursed dully, feverishly, sensing that somehow these police cars were there to trap him.

A car stopped a few yards away, its spotlight still on Gentry. A door slammed, voices sounded.

"Watch him—keep him covered!" Mike Gentry heard one of the voices urge sharply. "It might be an act!"

Then Mike Gentry slipped face forward again in the mire, his consciousness mantled by a half-cloak of pain and exhaustion. He heard footsteps in the mud beside him, heard startled, sharp exclamations.

"He's got a rod!" someone shouted.

Gentry felt an instant of blazing pain as a heavy foot kicked the automatic from his hand, smashing his weary fingers. Then hands were pulling him to his feet, roughly, brutally, and a flashlight beam glared mercilessly in his eyes.

Someone grabbed Gentry by the hair, jerking his rolling head back sharply, the better to reveal his features.

GENTRY closed his eyes against the glare.

"Know him?" a voice snapped.

"Hell no. Never seen him before," another voice answered. "A tough looking hood, If I ever saw one!"

Another voice sounded, then, a few yards away.

"Good God!" the voice shouted in amazement and excitement. "Look who he plugged!"

There was the sound of feet sloshing through the mud swiftly to the side of the last speaker, then quick, equally incredulous exclamations.

The footsteps sloshed back to Gentry.

"Drag him over and let him see the guy he bumped, in case he don't know already!" a voice snarled.

Mike Gentry sensed that the flash beam was taken from his face. He

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opened his eyes in the rainy darkness. Men on either side of him, holding him with vise-like, aching grips, dragged him several yards through the mud to where a knot of six other men, three uniformed and three plainclothesmen, had gathered around a dark lump that proved to be a body lying in the mud.

The knot opened to admit Gentry and the men who dragged him forcibly up to the strangely inert body lying there in the alley in the rain.

"Turn the body over again," someone said, "and let this killer get a look at the job he done!"

Someone, a uniformed policeman, turned the body over so that the face stared open-eyed in death at them.

"Why'ja kill him, hood?" the plainclothesman holding Gentry's right arm rasped hoarsely. "Stickup, or planned job?"

Mike Gentry looked down at the body, nausea gripping his vitals until he thought he was going to vomit.

"I—I didn't kill him! he mumbled, horrified.

Someone slapped Gentry hard across the mouth, bringing agony to his aching skull again.

"The hell you didn't!"

Gentry tried to speak. Tried to find the words that would explain the wild, impossible, sickening irony of the accusation. He tried to speak, but failed.

Someone slapped him again. And again there were stabs of agony lancing through his skull. But the stabs of agony could not erase from Gentry's mind the picture of the murdered man lying there in the alley mud. Nothing could erase that ghastly picture.

The face staring open-eyed in death at them all was *his own* face—the face of Mike Gentry. It was the real body of Mike Gentry!

And the murder Mike Gentry was being accused of—as madly impossible as it was—was his own murder!

He was slapped across the mouth again. And as he shut his eyes and clamped his jaws against the pain, Mike Gentry heard a voice grating that accusation harshly at him.

"You murdered Mike Gentry, you rat!"

"Come on," growled another voice. "Let's take him back to the station. It's too damned messy in this alley."

CHAPTER XI

"You Killed Mike Gentry!"

THE next hours were a dazed, impossibly agonizing horror for Mike Gentry. From the moment in which they'd hurled him into a prowl car and raced madly back through the streets to the central police station until the time the bucket of water sloshed over him in the cold, bare grilling room, Gentry had lost consciousness. But after that, he was to wish for unconsciousness a thousand times during the hours that followed.

He was propped in an agonizingly uncomfortable chair, and his slightest painful squirm was a signal for a slap across his bloody mouth.

They had held forth a crude piece of iron piping, the end of which was covered with hair and bloodstain.

"This is what he clubbed you with defending himself, isn't it?" a voice demanded.

"No," Gentry mumbled through swollen lips. "No!"

"He saw you coming at him with a rod, and grabbed this to belt you with," the voice went on relentlessly. "Don't lie. We found it in Mike Gentry's dead hand! You shot him just as he belted you on the skull with it!"

"I didn't," Gentry mumbled. "I didn't!"

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"It's been analyzed already," the voice persisted harshly. "The blood-stains and hair on the end of it are yours. Don't cause us no more trouble denying it!"

"No!" Gentry mumbled. And again a beefy palm slapped him across the mouth.

"You were knocked silly by the guy you murdered, just as you plugged him. You staggered back, unable even to try to get his dough, and collapsed in the alley with the gun still in your hand. The gun you plugged him with!"

It had continued like that for what seemed to be an eternity to Gentry. The endless questions, the beefy palm smashing across his already swollen and bloody mouth, the aching agony in his skull, the white, hot glare of the light, the cramped torture of that chair, the faces all around him, glaring, hostile, leering.

At last he had been only too glad to sign the paper thrust before him, sign a wavering, sweaty—*Joe Brock.*

The voices ceased after that, and they took him to a cell where he was able to stretch out on a hard cot. A doctor came in a little later in the middle of Gentry's feverishly exhausted slumber, and woke him by the sharp, stinging torture of medical alcohol cleaning and swabbing the wound in his skull.

They left him to his feverish nightmares, then. Mike Gentry, alias Joe Brock. Mike Gentry, who'd confessed gladly, at last, to having murdered Mike Gentry. . . .

MORNING came, or a cold, soupy gray day, that heralded his equivalent of morning, and with it consciousness returned to Mike Gentry. Though he had slept for less than five hours, Gentry felt strong enough, at least, to rise and slide to the edge of his cot, where he sat with his throbbing head in his hands for a moment.

He realized, then, that it must be almost noon, inasmuch as his grilling had lasted several hours, and since it couldn't have been later than six in the morning when the squad cars had found him there in the alley.

Bitterly, Gentry wondered why they had bothered to allow him even such brief slumber. And then he remembered the confession that he'd signed, and realized that they could afford to give him time to regain some strength and normalcy for the hearings in the afternoon before the State's Attorney's staff and newspapermen.

For Gentry didn't doubt that there would now be such a hearing. He tried to recall, in fact, any occasion of murder followed by a swift confession or apparent guilt which had not been dealt with by the local police in much the same manner he now awaited.

Bitterly, Gentry amused himself by concocting captions and headlines to fit beneath his pictures as they would appear in the afternoon papers.

"Held in Slaying of Self!" That, Gentry thought, should be a corker.

"Gentry Held in Gentry Murder Guilt!" might be another droll picture headline.

And then Gentry thought of the most ironic of all. A picture of himself, in his strange new, or borrowed, body, of course, with the neat little caption quoting Death Number Nine in effect.

"Those who love this man will know him."

That would be ripe irony, Gentry decided, gingerly touching the still swollen bruises on his head and face. And suddenly, bitterly, and without humor, Gentry began to laugh.

It seemed so ridiculous, so damned

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tragically ridiculous, that it all should have come to such an end. Mike Gentry, wheedling a furlough from the jaws of death, comes back to find three people who love him and even more ironic, bring his own murderer to justice. Net result—the most thorough kicking around from the hands of fellow mortals that he'd ever received in all his life, plus bringing himself to justice for the murder of himself!

Mike Gentry rose and walked stiffly to the window of his cell, staring through the barred grillwork down into the jailyard and the bleak brown brick wall that fenced it in.

He stood there, staring at nothing but the dismal grayness of the day.

"What a happy and triumphant return," he muttered. "I wonder if Saint Peter is getting his quota of laughs, if he can see me now."

SUDDENLY Gentry heard a rattling of keys behind him. He turned, to see a lockup keeper opening his cell door. The lockup officer had a tin basin, a thin towel, and a small piece of soap in his hands.

"Wash up before grub, Brock!" the keeper snapped. He stepped into the cell, placed the half-filled basin and soap and towel on Gentry's bunk. Then he stepped out, locked the cell door and went away.

Dispiritedly, his body still aching in every muscle, Gentry moved over to his bunk. He jabbed a finger experimentally into the basin. The greasy water was lukewarm.

As Gentry sat down beside the bowl and began to wash apathetically, he wondered bitterly how Frazier and Henchley had made such a complete frame-up on him so quickly.

It was obvious, of course, that it had been Henchley's tactical genius that arrived on the plan of framing an unknown and unwanted hood by the name of Joe Brock with a murder committed but a few hours before.

And it seemed also fairly obvious that Frazier and Henchley had seen to it that Mike Gentry's body was moved from the immediate scene of the killing until such time as they decided what to do about covering the trail.

"I must have been the answer to their prayers," Gentry thought aloud, "walking in on them like that. Hell, I'll bet they were hard at planning how to dispose of my real body right at the time I walked into that office!"

Again Gentry laughed bitterly. "A Heaven-sent fall guy for a bum rap;" he snorted.

Gentry wondered then what Frazier's and Henchley's reactions would have been had they known that the guy they were framing for the murder of Mike Gentry was actually Mike Gentry in another body, come to avenge the wrong done him.

The thought made Mike Gentry wince. It was bad enough just thinking that they were undoubtedly rubbing their hands at the moment in triumph over having carried out a murder and frame-up to perfect completion.

"And now Frazier'll be free to play ball with his brother rodent, Henchley," Gentry mused sickly. "They can turn the upper floors of the Panther Club into a big time and extra crooked gambling joint. It's easy to see now why Frazier was so chummy with Henchley. Hell, the snake probably promised Frazier a take from the games that would almost triple his present income."

And yet, Gentry frowned, there was one thing which was still not perfectly clear. Why had they thought it so necessary to murder him, Mike Gentry, before going through with their plans?

"I would have tried to steer Frazier

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clear of the idea had I known," Gentry reasoned. "And yet, I couldn't have stopped him from doing as he saw fit with the club. Hell, I turned over my interest in it to him months ago. It isn't reasonable to think that they'd imagine I'd put a direct kibitz on their plans. And yet, what other reason could there have been to make either Frazier or Hinchley, or both, want to get me so permanently out of the picture?"

Mike Gentry's throbbing head was beginning to ache again, and he gave up his speculations for the moment. He finished washing and now searched through his clothing to see if they'd left him any cigarettes or matches. He still had both.

GENTRY rose from his cot, lighting his cigarette as he did so. Then, as he blew out the match, he heard the footsteps coming down the hallway of his cell block.

He stood there listening as the steps drew closer, a frown furrowing his forehead. Gentry was aware that the cell block in which he was imprisoned was otherwise uninhabited, separated from the tiers in which the other prisoners were held.

Those footsteps would have something to do with him. Of that much he was certain. Perhaps they heralded the men from the State's Attorney's office, perhaps newspaper photographers, reporters.

Gentry took a deep draught from his cigarette and stepped over to the door of his cell. He could hear voices, now, as the footsteps came nearer.

"Make it short," someone was saying. "You shouldn't be allowed to see him until the State's Attorney's crowd goes over him, really. My orders are no visitors until then. I'm only doing this as a favor to you-know-who."

Gentry identified the voice, then, as belonging to the lock-up keeper. But the muffled voice that answered was both indistinguishable and brief. Gentry had to content himself with waiting to see who his visitor would be.

Now the steps were much closer. Gentry waited tensely.

The lock-up keeper and his visitor stepped into sight an instant later. Stepped into sight, as Gentry stifled the exclamation that came involuntarily to his lips with his recognition of the visitor.

He was a short, seemingly wiry man, this visitor, and he wore a topcoat that seemed a trifle too large for him. The collar was turned up around his ears, helping—along with a slouch brimmed fedora pulled low over his eyes—to hide his long, horsey features. His hands were buried deep in the pockets of the topcoat, and his eyes glared balefully at Mike Gentry through the bars.

Mike Gentry's visitor was Joey Orlando, his ex-valet and bodyguard!

CHAPTER XII

"You Dirty Snake!"

THE lock-up keeper was fumbling with his keys while Gentry stared speechlessly at Orlando and the latter's blazing eyes shot stabbing hatred through the bars at him.

Opening the cell door an instant later, the lock-up keeper turned to Joey Orlando.

"Okay, now. Remember what I said. Not long, now. If they found out I let anyone in to see him, for an instant, it'd be my job!"

Joey Orlando nodded and stepped into the cell.

"Run on down the hall," he told the guard over his shoulder. "I'll call you when I get done with my business."

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The lock-up keeper nodded worriedly and disappeared.

Then Joey Orlando turned back to Mike Gentry. The horse faced little ex-valet bodyguard's lips went flat in a snarl.

"So you're the dirty snake who rubbed out Mike, eh?" he grated. "You're the lousy so-and-so who killed the greatest guy I ever knew!"

Joey Orlando pulled his right hand from his topcoat pocket, then, in a lightning swift gesture.

He held an automatic pistol in his hand, trained unwaveringly on Gentry's stomach, and his voice dropped to a harsh whisper of frenzied hate.

"The State ain't gonna kill you, Brock. I'm gonna do the job for them. I'm gonna square accounts for Mike Gentry personally, see? If you know any prayers, say 'em fast, skunk!"

It was only then that Gentry found voice.

"Joey," he said softly. "Joey, you crazy damn fool, you. You haven't pulled a trigger since that night in Monte Carlo. Don't you remember what I told you about the odds on plugging a guy? Don't you remember what I *always* told you? Don't you remember that the smart guy plays the odds?"

Joey Orlando looked up swiftly, his face a mixture of fright, bewilderment and shock. His jaw went agape foolishly. The blazing sheen of hatred in his eyes vanished, and something closer to sanity returned.

"Wha—" Orlando gurgled chokingly.

"Don't you know me, Joey?" Mike Gentry said softly.

Joey Orlando shook his head from side to side idiotically.

"No," he muttered again and again. "No. You can't be. You can't be!"

"But I *am*, Joey. I *am*. You know it, Joey. You know I am. You don't have to know *why*, or even *how*, Joey. All you have to know is that I am Mike Gentry!"

Joey Orlando's mouth twitched, his eyes still widely incredulous. And then Mike Gentry moved forward, putting his hands on Joey's shoulders gently.

"Get hold of yourself, Joey," Gentry whispered commandingly. "You gotta get hold of yourself, see?"

There were tears in Joey Orlando's eyes, now, and his body trembled as if from a sudden chill. His lips moved, and he found words.

"Mike," he whispered. "Then you weren't—you weren't" he broke off.

"I'm still alive, Joey," Gentry said. "And this is the way I look. That's all you have to be sure of."

"Gimme a minute, jest a minute, to, to—" Joey whispered hoarsely, dazedly.

"Sure, Joey," Mike Gentry said soothingly. "Take all the time you want."

Joey Orlando slumped down on the cot, looked up at Gentry, shook his head shudderingly, and buried his face in his hands. Mike Gentry stood there looking down on his faithful little valet-bodyguard with eyes that shone mistily. Joey had known him. Joey had known him. Good little Joey Orlando hadn't failed as the rest had . . .

IT TOOK a little while before Mike Gentry was able to talk to Joey Orlando with any hope of a coherent discussion. And even then, as Gentry sought from the little valet-bodyguard the information he wanted, Joey would pause from time to time to fix Gentry with a gaping stare of numbed bewilderment.

"Who fixed it so you could get in here to kill me, Joey?" Mike Gentry demanded.

"Frazier," Orlando mumbled. "He had a pull with some big shots."

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"Did he know that you intended to kill me, or, rather, kill the man you thought killed me?" Gentry asked.

Joey Orlando nodded dully. "Yeah, yeah, Mike. He told me to go to it, and more power to me. He said no jury would ever execute me for avenging the life of the guy who meant everything in the world to me. But I didn't even care so much about that. About what happened to me after I did it, I mean. I just wanted to rub out Mike Gentry's murderer. That's all that mattered to me."

Gentry's mouth went tight in wrath at this.

"So Frazier told you that, eh? Frazier told you no jury would hang you for it. He was right. But he didn't mention any jury would be forced to send you up for life for such a killing—the skunk!"

Joey Orlando looked up uncomprehendingly.

"But why would Frazier wanta get me into such a mess, Mike?"

Mike Gentry tossed his cigarette on the floor and ground it out savagely.

"Because Frazier and his pal Henchley were the ones who rubbed me out, or paid to have me rubbed out. That's why!"

Joey Orlando's expression on hearing this was stunned outrage.

"You *know* that, boss?"

Mike Gentry nodded emphatically. "And knowing that they'd rubbed me out and covered their own slimey trail by framing a guy they thought to be a dumb trigger man, they hit on the idea of putting you out of the way by fixing things so's you could kill the dumb fall guy in his cell, surrounded by cops. Naturally, they didn't know that the dumb fall guy and Mike Gentry were both the same."

Gentry's last words brought the frightened bewilderment back to his little valet-bodyguard's eyes. Seeing this, Gentry added: "But don't worry about that angle, Joey. Don't worry what happened to me, or how it is I'm not in the old Mike Gentry's hide any more. Just think like bodies are only clothes, kind of. Just think like I got my good suit ruined and had to change to the one you see me wearing now, see?"

Joey Orlando nodded uncertainly but obediently, and suddenly, to Gentry's surprise, spoke.

"And I'll think that Frazier and Henchley were the ones who ruined your good suit, eh boss? I'll think like they were the cause of you having to borrow this not-so-good suit, huh?"

Mike Gentry grinned suddenly. Joey was coming back slowly but surely to his normal self.

"That's right, Joey," Gentry said. Then his lips went tight in anger once more. "Anyone else know Frazier fixed it to get you into this place to kill the guy you thought to be Joe Brock?"

Joey Orlando looked up in sudden rememberence.

"MARGO," he said. "Margo Drusane. She 's waiting outside in a car right now, in case I was able to get away after bumping off the guy I thought killed you."

"How did she find out what you planned to do?" Gentry asked in surprise.

"Frazier told her, I guess," Joey said. "She came to me, then, and offered to help. She was all broke up about you, of course, when she read it in the newspapers. She said she'd drive a getaway car on the chance that I was able to lam the jail after the shooting."

Mike Gentry cursed. "The poor damned fool kid," he said. "That skunk Frazier tipped her off deliberately, knowing she'd get into trouble too!"

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Joey Orlando looked thoughtful.

"I never liked Frazier, boss," he muttered, "and now I'm beginning to have reasons."

"That makes two of us," Gentry said. "But now that I've got some idea of what's in the wind, I think I'd better get going while the chance to get going still holds. That guard'll be coming back in a few minutes, Joey. Give me your rod."

Joey Orlando looked bewildered again. But he handed the automatic to Gentry unhesitatingly.

"Whatcha gonna do about the outside guards, boss?" Joey demanded. "There's two of 'em I had to pass."

"Take off your hat and coat, Joey," Gentry said.

The little valet-bodyguard did as he was told. Gentry donned the togs which, fortunately enough, had been oversized on Orlando.

"I overpowered you, Joey. Take off your tie, while I knot your wrists with it," Gentry said. "Better take off your belt, too, and I can use that to tie your feet. We'll use a shoestring and a handkerchief as the gag."

"I wish I could go along with you, Mike," Joey Orlando said as Gentry swiftly trussed him. "I wish to hell I could be of some help."

"Joey Orlando," Mike Gentry declared almost buoyantly, "you'll never know how damned much you've helped me today. And no matter what happens, remember that I'll never forget it, no matter what happens to me."

"You ain't gonna plug the lock-up keeper, Mike?" Joey asked.

Gentry shook his head. "No. I'll just bounce this off his bean." He gestured with the gun barrel. "These people around here got a few broken skulls coming to them," he said wryly. "Don't you worry about getting messed up in the stink over my break, Joey. Just stick to your story. They can't touch you for it. The guards Frazier fixed to get you in here will take a rap, but if they're friends of Frazier's, it'll be a pleasure seeing them get fired."

"Good luck, Mike," Joey said fervently.

"Stick to your story, Joey. But don't tell anyone the truth. I mean about me."

Joey Orlando grinned for the first time.

"You want me to put myself in line for the booby hatch, Mike? You think I'd be that loudmouthed?"

Mike Gentry smiled. "I never thought of that, so help me, Joey," he said. Then he asked: "Where is Margo parked in that car?"

Joey Orlando told him.

Gentry nodded. "I'll have to use the car she's driving to get out of range of any quick chase. I'll clear her of any implication in the getaway by making her step out as soon as we get a few blocks away."

Gentry wore the topcoat and felt fedora now, collar pulled up and hat brim down, as Orlando had worn both garments when entering. He held a handkerchief and a shoestring in his hand, with which he began to arrange a makeshift gag on his valet-bodyguard.

The gag in place, Gentry stepped back, appraising his work. He nodded grimly, satisfied.

"So long, Joey Orlando," Gentry whispered. "I'll see you again, sometime, somewhere. And until then, play the odds, pal." He waved briefly, stepped to the cell door and leaned out just far enough so that his hat could be seen.

"Hey, lock-up keeper," he called in a fair imitation of Joey Orlando's voice. "Come on. I'm all done talking to this jerk."

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Mike Gentry heard the guard's steps starting briskly down the cell block hall. He took a firm grip on the automatic in his hand, and waited patiently . . .

CHAPTER XIII

"Hello, Baby!"

MARGO DRUSANE sat behind the wheel of a low-slung convertible roadster, parked directly across from the side street entrance to the jail. The motor was idling, Gentry noted, as he stepped casually past the uniformed guards inside the entrance.

The guards looked up at Gentry, noted the pulled brim hat and the elevated collar, nodded, and looked away again. Evidently they were not too anxious to notice the illicit visitor. They had jobs to protect, too.

Gentry speculated briefly on how much their jobs would be worth when the news of his break came to light, and kept his pace a casual stroll as he crossed the street toward the convertible.

The sight of her sent Gentry's heart into a quicker beat than the danger of his jailbreak had produced. Margo—doing this damned fool thing along with loyal Joey Orlando. Margo, who was another one to whom the real Mike Gentry could declare himself with every certainty of her believing and accepting the situation.

She turned as Mike's footsteps sounded near the car, peering out the window. She was smoking a cigarette, and squinted through the smoke and the moisture on the window pane.

Mike Gentry moved around to the other side of the car and opened the door. There would be no time here to make his identity known to Margo, Gentry realized. And for that reason he held the automatic in his hand, trained on the girl, as he slid into the seat beside her.

"Okay," Gentry said harshly. "Step on it, baby. Follow the directions I give you, and make time!"

Margo's eyes were wide in horror at the sight of the gun and the appearance of this stranger.

Her lovely red lips opened in an exclamation of dismay which Gentry cut off with another curt order.

"Come on. I'm not fooling around, baby. Drive, and fast!"

Margo spoke at last, her voice choked in fright.

"Where?" she asked.

"Straight ahead until I give you another direction," Gentry replied.

The girl threw the car into gear and they roared off.

GENTRY bade her turn some four blocks later, and they drove along a wide boulevard in the direction of the city's suburbs for another ten minutes before either spoke. Then Margo broke the silence.

"Did you kill Orlando, or what?" she asked huskily, voice trembling.

Mike Gentry frowned. How would she know him to be the man little Joey Orlando had decided to kill? And then he realized, Joey's hat and coat were the answer. She recognized them, and had drawn her own conclusions.

"No," Gentry said almost gently. "I didn't kill Joey. He's tied up on the cot in the cell where they had me. He wasn't even hurt, baby."

Margo drove on, wordlessly, and Gentry, gun still in his hand and pointed at the girl, turned his attention back to the road ahead. They were getting out into wider boulevard stretches which foretold the end of the city line and the start of county highways.

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Then Gentry instructed Margo to turn again, and they entered a narrow, deserted little sidestreet in a never-exploited realty subdivision. The tall trees on either side of the street, the thick, high grass growing in the vacant lots meant to hold buildings at one time, provided a perfect temporary shelter from observation by any cars moving along the boulevard they had just turned off.

"Stop the car, baby," Gentry ordered.

Silently, Margo did as ordered.

"Now give me the keys," Gentry instructed.

Again the frightened girl obeyed. Mike Gentry dropped them into his pocket. He grinned at the girl suddenly.

"Hello, baby," he said, "don't you remember me?"

Margo's expression grew even more frightened.

"What are you going to do to me, Brock?" she asked tremulously. "I didn't have anything to do with your frame-up. I swear to God, Brock that I didn't!"

"Baby, I'm not a guy named Brock. I'm Mi—" Gentry began, and then his expression changed swiftly, and his jaw went grim. "Say that again, baby. Say what you just said once more!"

The girl shrank back from him in sick terror.

"I said I didn't have anything to do with your frame-up, Brock. I saw them drag you out of the Panther Club, and I knew they were going to tie you in with Gentry's murder, somehow, to clear themselves. But they're the ones who planned the whole thing, honestly. Believe me, they did!"

Sickly, Mike Gentry stared at the girl who'd been his but brief hours before. Numbly, he realized the staggering significance of her words. But he forced himself to bring it to a climax with his next question.

"How about Orlando?" he demanded. "He didn't seem to know I was framed for Gentry's killing. He tried to plug me."

Still ashen in her terror, Margo babbled quickly in answer.

"He didn't know," she said. "The little sap was sent, primed up by Frazier, to kill you. He thought you'd killed Gentry and wanted personal revenge. He didn't know that Frazier and Henchley had put Gentry out of the way and framed it on you. Honest, Brock. That's all I know. I've told you the truth. I'll get money for you. Enough to get out of town, to get away. I promise. I swear. Please don't kill me! Please don't look at me like that!"

She began to sob hysterically.

MIKE GENTRY stared at the girl in sick loathing. This, then, was the explanation for her having left with Frazier and Henchley on the night that those two had him murdered!

Gentry said sharply, "Stop blubbering and look at me!"

Margo turned an hysterical, tear smeared face toward him. Her mascara, rouge, lipstick and powder were streaked into a mess that did little to enhance her appearance.

"Ever seen me before?" Gentry demanded.

The terrified girl shook her head wildly.

"Not until last night, when they took you from the Panther Club to frame you on—"

"Other than then," Gentry cut in.

"No. No, so help me. I never have!" Margo moaned.

Mike Gentry's expression was contemptuous. "A little guy named Joey Orlando remembered seeing me before," he grated. "But that was only because of one thing. The crazy, loyal

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little squirt had loved a guy named Mike Gentry. I guess you never did, at any time, even though Gentry was damned fool enough to think so."

The girl had buried her cosmetic smeared features in her hands again and was sobbing once more in terror. She didn't seem to hear. Gentry prodded the automatic into her side.

"Get out from behind that wheel, baby," he said harshly. "You got a long walk home!"

The girl continued to sob wildly, unheeding.

Mike Gentry leaned past her and pushed down on the door handle on her side. The door swung open.

Deliberately, Gentry placed the automatic back in his pocket. Then he placed one hand on the girl's shoulder, the other against her side.

Gentry shoved the girl completely out of the seat and car and onto the street. He reached into his pocket, found the ignition key, and started the convertible.

In the rear vision mirror as he drove off, Gentry could see the bedraggled, hysterical girl picking herself up dazedly from the pavement.

He laughed briefly, harshly.

Mike Gentry looked at the clock on the dashboard as he turned the nose of the convertible back onto the boulevard in the same direction in which he and the girl had originally been travelling.

It was fifteen minutes to two o'clock. Less than two hours had elapsed since he'd opened his eyes in that cell, beaten, embittered and ready to throw in the sponge.

And now, thanks to Joey Orlando and the information from a blonde he'd once intended to marry, Mike Gentry had a fighting chance to clean up the business that had brought him this strange, mad furlough from Eternity.

A fighting chance to deal from the same deck and in the same way in which his murderers had second-dealt him. A fighting chance that would hold until five o'clock tomorrow morning at the outside. For at five o'clock, his forty-eight hour furlough was over.

Gentry wondered briefly what would follow that. And then he pushed the thought from his mind. Let it follow in order. It was a cinch that it would do so, inexorably. The only thing that mattered to Gentry was the settlement with Frazier and Henchley before he went back to Death.

And that was the immediate problem to which he had to find a lot of angles, especially with the time running out as swiftly as it was.

Gentry turned his mind to his first consideration. Should he try to get Henchley and Frazier as quickly as possible? In broad daylight, now, if he got the chance? There would be greater risks in that, especially since a dragnet was undoubtedly underway at that very moment by a band of highly indignant police in search of one escaped murderer named Joe Brock, otherwise, and previously, known as Mike Gentry.

Gentry frowned and began to weigh every factor, every angle, with the infinitely painstaking computation of odds that had made him the cool, unerring, calculating gambler he'd once been.

CHAPTER XIV

"While the Sands Run"

AFTER Mike Gentry had parked the much too conspicuous convertible down in the warehouse district along the railroad terminals, located in the first outlying suburb, he secreted himself aboard a convenient freight train

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—eventually destinated for San Francisco—and permitted it to carry him approximately a hundred miles away from the city in which he was sought.

At a watering spot, Gentry climbed off the freight train and took to the countryside. He walked for several hours, keeping clear of the highways and—except when he was forced to cross them—infrequent sideroads.

An hour later, as darkness began to settle on the countryside, Gentry stumbled onto a deserted farmhouse conveniently clear of any decent roadway approaches.

Half an hour later, stretched out on a makeshift bed of straw with his rolled coat as a pillow for his head, Mike Gentry was sound asleep in the musty, dust-thick parlor of the old farmhouse.

He had taken into his careful calculations, of course, the urgent necessity for rest, and his slumber marked the successful conclusion of the first leg of his scheme . . .

WHEN Gentry woke, some three hours later, it was to the chirping serenade of crickets and the croaking of bullfrogs in a nearby swamp.

The gray drizzle of rain which had persisted throughout the day was over, and the night sky was clear, cloudless, and gemmed with a million stars.

Methodically, Gentry went about preparing his departure, and when he at last shugged into the topcoat he'd taken that morning from Joey Orlando, he took from its right hand pocket the automatic pistol he'd carried since that time.

Carefully, Gentry checked the magazine clip, found the weapon fully loaded, and inspected the mechanism to make certain the gun was perfectly in order. Then, grimly satisfied, he put it back in his pocket and stepped out into the night.

Gentry walked for twenty minutes until he neared the big state highway, and it was another ten minutes before he came to the roadside restaurant and gas station where the big trailer trucks were lined.

Even then, Gentry didn't emerge from the roadside underbrush until he saw one of the truck drivers step out of the restaurant and head for the cab of his huge trailer truck.

While the driver was warming the motor, Gentry slipped unobtrusively across the highway, moved in between the big trucks until he was beside the readying vehicle, and ducked down underneath it.

When the truck pulled out, one minute later, and headed toward the city Gentry had fled that afternoon, he was firmly, though quite uncomfortably barnacled beneath it.

Even though the big trailer was making excellent speed, Gentry was grateful for the fact that the roadways they covered were all smooth, well-paved highways. Anything else would have made his precariously clinging journey too uncomfortable for a human being to bear.

For the first hour, and the first sixty-odd miles, the big truck roared cityward without interruption. But as they drew nearer to the metropolis they hit the first of an inevitable series of stop lights which would grow more frequent from then on.

It was at the third of these stops that Gentry overheard the vocal indications of the police dragnet, which was seeking him, in action. State troopers of the highway patrol had formed a blockade at that intersection. They were examining trucks, questioning the occupants of automobiles, and in general serving as a sieve through which it would be impossible for the hunted murderer and jailbreaker to pass.

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As Gentry had foreseen, vehicles of any kind, truck or passenger car or bus, headed toward the city were neither stopped nor searched, nor were their occupants questioned.

It would be utterly ridiculous to suppose that the fugitive would be heading right back into a city he'd escaped.

Or so, at any rate, the police had figured. Exactly as Mike Gentry had decided they would figure.

HALF an hour later, the trailer truck carrying Gentry passed into the city limits. And ten minutes after that, on the east side of town, Gentry scrambled out from under his unwitting carrier.

Brushing as much of the dust as he could from his clothes, Gentry transferred the automatic to a makeshift holster position in his belt beneath his suitcoat. Then, walking through an alley, Gentry rid himself of the topcoat by stuffing it into a garbage pail.

When he emerged from the alley, Gentry walked several more blocks until he came to a small residential-business street. The clock in the window of a drugstore told him that it was shortly after midnight.

Gentry was grimy, unshaven. His clothes resembled those used by a manual worker on a dirty job who determinedly wears a once "good" suit to get the last stitch of service from it.

At a refuse box in the middle of the next block, Gentry found enough old newspapers to lump into a fair sized ball. These he wrapped somewhat neatly with a not too soiled newspaper. He tied the package neatly with a piece of string found in the same refuse.

Now, equipped with his package under his arm, the nonchalantly strolling Gentry looked very much like a night-shift worker going to or coming from a tough job in some factory.

At the first streetcar line he came to, Gentry waited patiently for a trolley heading uptown.

When he boarded it he paid his fare to the conductor, took a transfer which he didn't intend to use, and walked back to a seat in the center of the car.

The trolley was rather crowded, carrying at least a dozen men who looked like older or younger brothers in toil of Gentry. They wore similar clothes, carried similar packages, seemed just as tired and as grimy.

Gentry had counted rather shrewdly that the police combing the city on the chance that he had not as yet escaped would hardly think to look for a fugitive murderer snoring serenely in the middle seat of a crowded streetcar, package in one hand, transfer in the other.

And so Gentry proceeded loudly to go to "sleep," making himself as comfortable as he could in the hard seat, throwing his head back, closing his eyes, and snoring.

No one paid the slightest attention to him after the first mild snores.

At midtown, just two blocks from the heart of the night club belt, Mike Gentry came "awake" with a start, dashed to the rear platform of the car, and pushed his way off through a stream of passengers getting on.

He joined the pedestrian stream, once he reached the sidewalk, threw away his transfer and, still clutching his "package," moved along like a man fearing arrival at his job too early.

Two blocks from the Panther Club, and half a block from the brightly lighted night club sector in which it was located, Gentry turned down another alley.

Now all pretense of leisure in his pace was gone. He tossed his dummy "package" away, and hurried on through the darkness. There was a rear entrance —through the kitchen—to the night

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club, and Gentry had decided long before that it would be his safest bet. His chances of slipping past the cooks, waiters and dishwashers who would be busily at work there, would be more than even, especially since Gentry was thoroughly familiar with each corridor, room, and closet of the place.

There was the chance, of course, that Frazier and Henchley, realizing that the man they'd framed had broken jail, would have torpedoes guarding the place. Certainly Fraier and Henchley would know by now—through the hysterical story of Margo Drusane—that the man they thought to be Joe Brock was thoroughly aware that they were the pair who framed him.

Still, Gentry smiled grimly to himself, they couldn't seek police protection. They couldn't because of the very simple fact that to do so would tip off their connection with the entire mess. Henchley and Frazier, Gentry felt fairly sure, would have ways in which to keep informed of the search for the fugitive Joe Brock. There was no doubt of that. But such information —thanks to Gentry's careful planning —would point only to the fact that Joe Brock had fled the city and was by now headed west.

MOMENTS later, Gentry arrived in the alley at the rear of the Panther Club. Aside from the parked cars of the employees, the open lot just off the alley behind the club was deserted.

Gentry smiled grimly in satisfaction at this. If Frazier and Henchley had hired thugs to guard the place they would most certainly be stationed out here as well as inside the club and out front. It seemed obvious, then, that they thought Joe Brock had fled the city while the chance was good.

Moving past the parked cars, Gentry slipped quietly up to the big windows of the club's kitchen. Standing aside, back against the wall, he peered inside.

The kitchen was bustling with activity. Waiters and busboys moved quickly in and out, cooks shouted orders, food checkers registered checks and drink counts.

Gentry stepped away from the window, satisfied that they would all be far too busy to notice anything that went on outside their kitchen in the next few minutes.

Above him was a fire escape, running down from the third floor to the second, where it ended in a pulley operated ladder that swung down to the ground when weight was put on it from above.

Gentry moved over to the iron grillwork which covered a darkened pantry window adjoining the kitchen. Here he grabbed the grill, pulling himself up to the window ledge. Then, using the grill as a ladder, he found footholds that enabled him to work his way precariously to the top of the window. From this point, leaning out while holding to the grill with one hand, Gentry was able to secure a grasp on the fire escape's ground ladder. He swung free, then, letting his weight carry the ladder down with him.

The apparatus clanked noisily, and as his feet touched the ground, both hands now grasping the ladder, Gentry held his breath and waited. Inside the kitchen they were all apparently too busy to have noticed anything.

Breathing again, Gentry pulled the ladder slowly down until it rested on the ground. Then he ascended it with nimble stealth. Once on the second floor of the fire escape platform, Gentry hauled the ladder back up again. Then he turned his attention to the door directly behind him. The door he knew would lead him into the second floor lounge of the club.

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It was locked.

Gentry stood there an instant, cursing silently. And then he heard the muted strains of the dance band flooding up from the dining room below. Directly below, of course, was the kitchen. And now, by pressing his ear to the door, Gentry was able to hear above the sounds of the band, the noise from the kitchen.

For another minute, Gentry continued to listen. There seemed to be no sounds coming from immediately beyond that door. But he waited another minute to be certain.

It was a chance he had to take.

Carefully, Gentry pulled forth his automatic. Just as carefully, he removed his coat, wrapping it around the gun which he held in his right hand.

Then Gentry placed the nose of the gun directly against the lock of the door. He waited, listening. The orchestra was coming to the close of its number. At the precise instant that the band crescendo signalled the end of the music, Gentry fired.

THE sound was louder than Gentry had figured, even though much of it was muffled by the coat he'd wrapped around the gun. But the lock on the door was shattered.

Gentry stood there breathlessly. The smoking gun still in his hand, the coat still wrapped around it. Had he timed it perfectly? Would the crescendo from the orchestra have drowned the noise? Could it have been heard in the almost deafening clatter of the kitchen?

Evidently not. At least, after another minute of waiting, there seemed to be no reaction to the sound of the shot. Gentry slipped into his coat again, and with his automatic still in hand, he pushed open the fire escape door and stepped into the second floor lounge of the Panther Club. . . .

CHAPTER XV

"Remember Me?"

THE ten seconds in which Mike Gentry stood inside the second floor lounge, blinking in the half-light of its luxurious surroundings, seemed that many hours to him.

He had closed the door swiftly behind him as he'd entered, so that not even a chance draught should send warning of his entrance. And now, as his eyes adjusted to this new lighting, they swept quickly across the room.

The lounge was deserted, but Gentry heard the sound of voices and laughter coming up the winding plush staircase that led to it. He realized then that some of the dancers leaving the floor were moving upstairs before returning to their tables.

There was the door that Gentry sought at the other end of the lounge. The door he knew opened into a hallway that would lead him to the front of the club. But the stairway entrance was between him and that door, and the voices were growing louder, nearer.

Gentry was thankful for the thick plush carpeting of the lounge as he sprinted across it for the door. And his shoulder hit it, swinging it inward, just as the first of the dinner guests entered the lounge. Gentry had the door closed behind him and was moving down the hallway just in time.

Now he moved cautiously, though quickly, toward the front of the club. Everything was familiar to him, but there was still the chance that he might run into a waiter, porter, or curious guest. He still held his automatic in his hand, ready for that emergency should it arise.

Twice Gentry halted at a sound in the hallway. But each time it proved to be a false alarm. And in another

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minute he reached the door at the end which led downstairs to the first floor of the club.

FRAZIER'S office was at the bottom of those stairs, just two doors away. Gentry took a deep breath, and started down them. They were winding, with a sharp turn after the first flight of ten steps. Gentry paused before this turn and listened.

The main door to Frazier's office would be locked, Gentry knew if either Frazier or Henchley was there. The automatic lock system opened only by a pressbutton from the inside.

But the offices were large, consisting of at least five rooms. They were, in fact, an office-apartment which Frazier could use to bathe, change clothes or sleep in if he desired. There were several other doors not as elaborately locked, Gentry knew which would be more easily accessible. One of them lay directly off the stairs.

Satisfied that there was no apparent indication of movement down there, Gentry continued cautiously down the steps.

Now he could see the smooth paneling of the door he sought—the door which should open into the bathroom of Frazier's office suite. Quickly, Gentry stepped down into the hall. A quick glance revealed that it was deserted at the moment.

Gentry stepped swiftly to the door, paused an instant, and listened. There was the sound of water running, splashing, and movement from inside.

He hesitated only an instant before putting his swiftly born gamble into effect.

Then Gentry rapped lightly on the door.

The sound of the splashing and movement halted abruptly. The noise of the running water continued. Again Gentry rapped lightly on the door.

He heard footsteps move toward it. Then a voice muffled and indistinguishable, muttered angrily.

Again Gentry rapped.

Now the voice from inside demanded angrily, "Who in the hell is out there?"

Gentry picked a waiter's name at random.

"Angelo. It's Angelo. I got something I gotta tell you. Something important, boss. The cook, he—"

There was an explosive curse from the other side of the door, and Gentry heard the lock swiftly turned. A voice snarled irately as the door opened.

"You blithering, brazen jackass! What in the hell do you mean by daring to bother me! You know employees aren't allowed within a hundred feet of this hallway at any time! Who let you through to—"

The door was fully open then, revealing a highly incensed Curtis Frazier. Frazier in shirtsleeves and obviously in the process of getting out of his clothes.

Mike Gentry spoke as he swung the gun barrel hard against the side of Curtis Frazier's mouth.

"Hello, skunk!" he grunted. "Remember me?"

The sound of teeth smashing was brief, sickening. Frazier toppled over backwards to the tile floor, his mouth a rapidly widening blotch of red.

MIKE GENTRY stepped into the bathroom and locked the door quickly behind him. Then he turned back to Frazier, groaning agonizingly on the floor, his hands to his smashed mouth.

Gentry wiped off the gun barrel on his sleeve.

"One too-loud peep out of you and it'll be the last," he said. "Get up!"

Frazier continued to whimper, his

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hands still over his bloody mouth.

Gentry stepped over to him, leaned down and grabbed him by the collar. He yanked him halfway to his feet, holding the gun barrel back in a threatening gesture.

"Get up!" he repeated. "Or I'll cave in the other side of your bridgework!"

Frazier managed to rise the rest of the way, clutching to the side of the washbowl for support. He swayed there weakly, gazing at Gentry from terror-crazed eyes.

"Where's Henchley?" Gentry demanded.

Through swollen, blood-smeared lips, Frazier started to reply. He choked, then, spitting out blood and three pieces of teeth. Mike Gentry pushed the gun into his ribs.

"Move along ahead of me," he ordered. "We're going to look around this dump a minute."

Frazier released his grasp on the washbowl, changing it for hand support along the wall as he turned to do Gentry's bidding. His hands left red prints on the white wall surface.

He stepped ahead of Gentry and moved weakly toward the bathroom door which opened into a bedroom. Gentry was behind him, automatic pressed in Frazier's back.

It was then that Gentry saw the girl.

She was bound, gagged, and stretched across the bed. Her originally skimpy costume was torn, disordered. Her blue eyes were wild with fear, and her red hair tangled and disarranged.

She was the cigarette girl, Gloria Allen.

Gentry jabbed the gun hard into Frazier's back in his stunned surprise.

"Hold it!" he grated. "Not a move out of you!"

Then he stepped quickly around Frazier and over to the bed. As swiftly as he could, keeping one eye on Frazier, Gentry freed the girl from the harsh ropes which had bitten deep into her soft flesh. Then he removed the gag from her mouth.

She was staring at him dazedly, frightened. But there was something else in her eyes, something more than the terror and bewilderment.

"Stand up, kid," Gentry ordered. "Move around as much as you can. Get as much circulation back as possible. I don't know how you fit into this. But you've got to get out of here in a hurry."

The girl tried to rise to her feet, and only after two efforts did she succeed. She was still staring at Gentry, open-mouthed, uncomprehending.

"You—you're the one they framed for Gentry's murder," she choked, whispering. "But—but, you're someone else, too. I mean—" She faltered, put her hands to her face, started to sway forward.

Gentry put an arm around her shoulder.

"Get yourself together," he said. "You've got to get out of here kid. You've got to get out of here in a hurry, see? There's going to be more blood around here, and a couple of bodies, understand? You've got to leave."

THE girl stared bewilderedly at Gentry, like someone in a trance. Her words were a harsh, choked whisper.

"Bodies," she shuddered convulsively. "I saw two of them. One was Mike Gentry's. They brought his body here. The other was yours, after they almost killed you here and took you out to place you beside Gentry's body. I saw them here, and heard them. And they . . . found . . . out

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. . . I . . . heard." She paused, a shudder coursing through her soft body once more. Then, eyes bewilderedly fixed on Gentry's face, she murmured. "You're the one they framed. But you're someone else, too. You're—you're. . . . Mike Gentry!"

Mike Gentry stared in amazement at the girl, opened his mouth to speak, and then she collapsed in his arms in a dead faint.

Cursing, Gentry moved to place the girl back on the bed. He was just doing so when he heard the voice that was not Frazier's.

"All right, Brock," the voice barked, "just hold that pose, and spread your hands wide—without your rod!"

Gentry knew that voice instantly. It belonged to Luke Henchley, and it came from the bedroom door.

"Spread those hands!" Henchley's voice repeated again.

Sick, cold despair closed its tight fist over Mike Gentry's heart. He dropped his gun and slowly extended his hands, palms out. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

"You Remind Me of a Guy!"

MIKE GENTRY heard Henchley's footsteps moving further into the room, and then the other's voice, saying:

"Okay. Now turn around. Slowly."

Gentry did as he was told, wheeling slowly to face the tall, thin, sour-faced gambler with the gun.

Frazier, far too sick to show any emotions of relief or triumph at the entrance of his henchman, leaned against a dresser, head low, vomiting on the floor.

"Move forward very slowly," Henchley told Gentry. "And keep your hands high and wide."

As Gentry started forward, Frazier, between the two but a little to one side, looked up long enough to glare redly at him.

"I made a mistake in knocking your teeth out," Gentry said harshly. "I should have knocked your damned brains out. They'd look a lot prettier on the floor."

Frazier gurgled something that was meant to be a curse, released his hold on the dresser and stumbled, blind with rage, at Gentry.

"Look out, you fool!" Henchley shouted wrathfully.

But Gentry had taken the swift opportunity for all it was worth. He leaped for Frazier, just as the night club owner came between Gentry and Henchley. Leaped for Frazier in a flying tackle that caught the other hard just above the knees and sent him crashing back into the pistol hand of Henchley.

Henchley's automatic roared deafeningly through the room.

Frazier screamed hoarsely as the bullet from Henchley's gun tore into his back.

And then Gentry, Frazier and Henchley were all on the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Gentry released his grasp from the badly wounded Frazier, hurled the other's body against Henchley, and reached out desperately for the gambler's gun hand.

Gentry hung on to Henchley's wrist doggedly as the tall, surprisingly strong gambler struggled to break free. They rolled over and across Frazier's body until Henchley was suddenly atop Gentry and smashing a big bony fist again and again into Gentry's mouth in an effort to make him release his grasp on the gun hand.

Mike Gentry turned his face from that agonizing barrage of blows, bring-

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ing his knee up to his chest as far as he could. Then he pushed back in a snapping kick that caught Henchley in the chest, then the groin.

The big gambler cursed in agony and fell back, releasing his hold on the automatic.

Mike Gentry rolled to one side and scrambled for the gun. He had it in his hand and was climbing to his feet when Henchley came after him again.

The tall gambler-killer had seized a bottle of shaving cologne from the dresser, broken it off short to a jagged stem, and was driving in wildly toward Gentry's face with it. His eyes were mad with rage and hatred.

Gentry triggered the automatic.

The gun clicked futilely!

And then Henchley was swinging his right fist hard into Gentry's face. A right fist which held the jagged, broken bottle neck.

Desperately, Gentry hurled himself to one side, away from the path of the killer, throwing the useless gun full into Henchley's face an instant before he did so.

AS GENTRY hit the floor he heard a curse of pain from Henchley, and then he rolled over and climbed to his feet to see the tall killer swaying there in the center of the room with both hands to his eyes. Henchley's forehead had been split wide by the gun barrel as the automatic smashed into his face. And now the wound gushed crimson blindness into Henchley's eyes.

Gentry stepped in swiftly and smashed a looping right hand into Henchley's jaw.

The gambler dropped to his knees, his hands no longer over his blinded eyes, but instead, groping wildly over the floor in search for the gun. He was sobbing and cursing madly.

Gentry grabbed him by the collar and hurled him to the floor, and as he did so, Henchley clawed desperately at his legs, trying to drag him down with him.

It was only now that Gentry became aware of the pounding on the doors outside the suite. How long it had been going on, he couldn't tell. But it couldn't have been for more than seconds. For in the next instant there was a thundering series of blows on the doors, and he heard the sound of splintering wood.

Gentry stepped back from Henchley's clawing hands, suddenly weak. He heard footsteps and voices storming in through Frazier's office, and knew that in a moment he'd be found here.

Gentry looked at Frazier lying beside the dresser. Henchley's accidental bullet had torn a hole the size of a silver dollar in the once dapper night club owner's chest. Frazier's eyes were open, but they were glazed, sightless. He was dying.

And then they were in the room. Police, in their blue uniforms, brandishing guns and shouting excitedly as they burst through the door. There was someone leading them who wasn't uniformed, who wore plainclothes, but who was a copper Gentry had known more than well in the other days. It was old Pat Flavin. His red face redder than ever before, and his white hair beneath his black fedora a shining halo.

Mike Gentry held his hands aloft.

"Okay," he told them wearily. "I'm Joe Brock. I've just evened up a score."

It was Pat Flavin who snapped the manacles on Gentry's wrists. . . .

MIKE GENTRY scarcely heard the words spoken to him in the small front room at Central Station.

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He sat there in the chair near the window while the three detectives pounded endlessly away with their questioning.

It was funny. It was very very funny. They thought they were going to scorch him. They thought that it was going to be like that.

But Gentry could see through the dirty pane of the window beside him, and he could see as far as across the street where a man stood just out of the glare of a street lamp looking over at the station.

The man was of medium stature. And he wore a black raincoat and a black fedora, and you couldn't see his face. Gentry knew him, even though he had never seen his face.

That man over there, that watcher, was—of course—Death Number Nine.

The furlough from eternity was almost at an end.

With every ticking second of the big clock on the wall directly across from Gentry, it drew closer to an end. And the cops continued to pound him with questions. Questions which Gentry continued to ignore.

It's almost over, Gentry thought bitterly. *It's almost at an end. Frazier's dead. That score is evened. I didn't get Henchley. No one will get Henchley, now. He was smarter, I guess. Three people who loved me. That was a laugh. Really funny. Little Joey Orlando, that's all. Good little guy. Wonder what Margo will think when she finds out her pal Frazier is dead. Probably break her heart, if she has one.*

The cops were still asking questions. Gentry answered yes or no as it pleased him. He didn't know to what he was answering yes or to what he was saying no. They were getting hotter and hotter.

It was then that Pat Flavin pushed his head into the room. He gave Mike Gentry a curious glance, then barked an order to the detectives. One of them stayed in the room, and the other two went out into the hall at Flavin's order.

The clock kept on ticking.

Across the street the shadowed figure of Death Number Nine waited patiently.

How long had it been since the ride in the prowl car from the Panther Club to the station? Gentry couldn't guess. A long time, when you counted it the way he was counting it now. Or maybe a short time.

Mike Gentry looked at the clock on the wall, then down to the detective. The detective just sat there staring at him, face expressionless.

The clock continued to tick.

Eternity drew closer.

MIKE GENTRY felt terribly tired, bitterly, sickly tired. And then the door opened again and Pat Flavin came into the room. He left the door ajar, nodding to the detective.

"Beat it," he said. "I want to talk to this prisoner."

The detective didn't seem surprised. He got up and left. Pat Flavin walked over to where Gentry sat and stood there in front of him, frowning.

"You're a lucky guy, Joe Brock," Flavin said suddenly.

Mike Gentry looked up in surprise.

"Henchley was enough out of his nut to spill his guts about everything. The Gloria Allen kid, the cigarette girl, gave us all the dope she knew about it. It turned out to be plenty, enough so that we could bluff Henchley into a confession. We'd not have had much chance to do so if he knew we had only one witness."

Suddenly Mike Gentry could hear the clock ticking ironic echoes to Pat Flavin's words.

"That's fine," Gentry said tonelessly.

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He looked out the window and across the street. Death Number Nine was still there. He didn't have many more minutes to wait.

"If Henchley had had any idea, either, that the Gloria Allen dame was out of her head, he'd never have admitted it all."

Mike Gentry asked casually. "How do you mean?"

"This is pathetic, B r o c k, and funny," Flavin said. "She thinks you are two people. She thinks you're really Mike Gentry. Of course, I made her promise to drop that dipsy-doodle talk for the sake of the credibility of her testimony. But she still thinks so."

Mike Gentry remembered, then. Remembered for the first time the girl's words when he'd released her in Frazier's room. He shook his head bewilderedly, a m a z e d l y, and something twisted in his heart.

"She, she thinks that?" Gentry asked slowly.

Pat Flavin nodded. "Yeah. But you don't seem to be so surprised at such screwball ideas."

Mike Gentry didn't answer at first. He was thinking: *There was another. Someone I hardly knew existed! Someone beside Joey Orlando who loved Mike Gentry. Two people loved Mike Gentry—a mug of a little valet and a sweet-faced little cigarette girl!*

THEN Gentry said: "It's very surprising." The sharp twisting of his heart came again. "It's too late now," he said to himself.

Flavin was looking over Gentry's shoulder through the window. Now he spoke.

"So you go scot free, Brock. We have nothing to hold you on. Incidentally, the guy standing across the street over there looks a lot like the fella who came up to me and tipped me off something was breaking in the Panther Club."

Mike Gentry looked sharply out the window. There was no one across the street but Death Number Nine. Gentry frowned.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Of course not," Flavin said. "And I'm not interested."

The clock ticked louder.

"That's funny," Pat Flavin said, "that guy is coming across the street."

Gentry turned again, to see Death Number Nine sauntering leisurely across the street.

"You'll have to stay in town for as long as we need you, Brock," Flavin said. "But, otherwise, you're free to beat it out of here right this minute. Now, get along with you, and don't shoot off your face to reporters until we give you the word."

Mike Gentry rose. He looked at the clock.

Five minutes were left.

He looked over his shoulder and down into the street. Death Number Nine now stood just below the window, near the entrance of the station.

"You don't seem so happy, Brock," Flavin said. "Or maybe you've got a poker face."

The clock ticked loudly. Less than five minutes now. Mike Gentry moved to the door. Pat Flavin stepped ahead of him and opened it for him.

"There's a dame waiting, the Gloria Allen screwball I told you about," Flavin said. "She's got a car and she wants to see that you get where you're going safely. Incidentally, she's a looker as you no doubt noticed. If I were you, I'd play up to her crazy streak. What the hell, let her think you're Mike Gentry." Flavin nudged Gentry and snickered.

Gloria Allen stood outside in the

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hall. She came quickly up to Gentry the moment she saw him. To Gentry the sight of her was agony, lovely agony.

She looked at Gentry exactly as she'd looked at him in those other days. And then she noticed Flavin, and colored.

"I—I want to thank you, Mr., er—" and again her gaze went to Flavin. "Mr. Brock," she finished lamely.

Mike Gentry forced a grin.

"That's all right, kid," he said. "I guess I owe a lot to you."

He started for the door. Three minutes, now, or maybe two. Death Number Nine would be waiting.

Gloria Allen's footsteps sounded, and he turned to find her hurrying along beside him. She touched his arm, and in a choked sobbing whisper, said: "I know you're Mike Gentry. I *know* it."

THEY started down the steps. Through the glass door Gentry could see Death Number Nine standing out there near the curb, waiting. How many minutes now? Two One?

At the bottom of the steps, they paused. Gentry put his hands gently on the girl's shoulders.

He kissed her.

"Goodbye, baby," he said.

"Mike. Mike," she whispered bewilderedly. "You *are* Mike Gentry. I don't understand. I can't pretend to understand. But I want to go with you, wherever it is. I want to be with you."

A voice sounded from the top of the stairs. Both turned and looked up to see Flavin standing there.

"Take good care of Brock, young lady," the detective said. "I have a personal interest in him. He reminds me of a guy I knew very well. In fact, he reminds me of the same guy you think he is, but I'm a copper, and I'd lose my reputation and my job if I ever dared say so."

Mike Gentry stared in shocked amazement at Pat Flavin. But the detective turned away, then, and disappeared down the hall.

"My God," Gentry muttered, "there were three. Flavin makes the third!"

Gloria Allen had opened the door, and now they stepped out into the street; Gentry sickly aware again of the presence of Death Number Nine.

Once again he turned to the girl. His voice was urgent, desperate.

"Goodbye, baby."

Mike Gentry kissed her this time thoroughly—a long, lingering kiss. A kiss intended to carry him through Eternity.

And then Death Number Nine stepped out of the shadows and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Pardon me," he said kindly.

Gentry had a sudden bitter flash of rage, and he wheeled to face the blackly attired agent, glaring into that shadowed face.

"All right," he grated. "I'm coming."

Death Number Nine's voice was still kind.

"I didn't mean to bother you," he said. "But I thought the young lady would like to know her slip is showing."

Mike Gentry's jaw fell open stupidly, as Death Number Nine touched the brim of his hat, bowed politely, and sauntered off.

For an instant Gentry was frozen speechless. Then he found voice.

"But—" he choked bewilderedly.

Death Number Nine paused and turned back.

"Was there something else you wanted to know?" the agent from Eternity inquired mildly.

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"The — the — the time — " Gentry stammered. "The time has run out."

"Oh, no. Not for a while yet," Death Number Nine said.

Dazed, uncomprehending, deliriously happy and terribly afraid to dare to be happy, Gentry managed one word.

"When?" he croaked.

"When?" Death Number Nine repeated. He seemed to shrug his shoulders. "After all, who knows when? Surely no other human does."

Death Number Nine turned away again, and strolled leisurely out of the street lamp glow into the darkness.

THE END

WHAT ABOUT LIFE?

Here is a question that has intrigued fantasy writers ever since fantasy was first written. What is the answer?

DOES life exist elsewhere than on this earth? This is a world-wide question—one which has been asked since the birth of man.

It is very difficult to answer this question. In the first place, we must define what we mean when we use the term life. This is not as simple a task as would first appear. For example, do we mean the type of life which exists about us on this earth—distinguished by a certain set of properties: growth, metabolism, reproduction, heredity, responsiveness, co-ordination and integration, and evolution? If we do, then we would assume all other possible life to be constructed of a protoplasm similar to the type of protoplasm that is the basic unit of the living matter about us. We would then approach our subject by studying the physical conditions that exist on the other planets, with the view in mind of whether a type of protoplasm resembling our own could survive these conditions, and develop its characteristics of life.

Even when we use our protoplasm as a standard for all types of life, the question of whether life exists elsewhere is still a hard one to answer. In the first place, even if we were to decide that a life, composed of our type of life unit, could not possibly exist on the other planets of our own solar system—how could we be sure that life of this type were not possible on another solar system. There are plenty of other solar systems; also millions of other planets, some of which may resemble the earth in every respect.

With this in mind, let us now analyze the conditions that exist on the other planets of our solar system. Let us constantly keep in mind the following question, as we study the physical environment of our brother planets: Can these physical factors produce the necessary environment for the existence and proper function of protoplasm? A positive answer would suggest the possibility of a type of life similar to our own. A negative answer means that no type of life, which we can possibly conceive, exists on this particular planet.

The opinion of most astronomers seems to be that none of the other planets of our own solar system could afford the suitable home for life. Most of the planets are ruled out because of their temperature range. Some are too hot to agree with our type of protoplasm. Some are too cold; others are too variable—being extremely hot when facing the sun, and extremely cold when not facing the sun directly. Others are ruled out because they lack the necessary atmosphere. For instance, none of the life on this earth could exist if we did not possess our atmosphere. Animal life is dependent upon the oxygen of the atmosphere to oxidize their foods, and in doing so supply the energy needed for the living activities taking place in their bodies. Our plants are constantly taking the carbon-dioxide from the atmosphere. The plants seem to have the capacity for combining carbon-dioxide, water, and the energy from the sun, in such a manner, as to produce the sugars and starches so basic to the life upon this earth. The animal kingdom cannot produce its own food, and hence must depend upon the plant kingdom for its source of energy. While the plant kingdom makes the food, the animal kingdom does the reverse. It oxidizes the food into its original constituents, giving back to the atmosphere the original carbon-dioxide the plants took away, and keeping for itself the energy the plant took from the sun.

From the above, it can be easily seen how important the atmosphere is to the process of life. It acts as a medium of exchange. It gives carbon-dioxide to the plants and takes back oxygen in return. To the animals it gives this oxygen and takes back carbon-dioxide in exchange.

When this cycle ends, and our atmosphere no longer can serve as this constant medium for the exchange of gases, life will cease to exist on this earth.

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Having established the importance of an atmosphere, let us examine the atmospheres of some of our brother planets. Could these particular atmospheres make our type of life possible?

Mars is believed to have a very thin atmosphere of water vapor. This water vapor condenses into a thin layer of frost at the poles. What about oxygen? It seems that the atmosphere of Mars has little oxygen, and that what oxygen it may have had, has long since combined with the surface iron to produce the red rust. This theory would at least explain the red color of Mars—a fact of which most people are familiar.

Venus has been found to possess a good sized atmosphere of almost pure carbon-dioxide. This would tend to make a suitable medium for a type of plant life resembling our own. As far as oxygen is concerned, none seems to exist in the atmosphere of Venus. Again, as in the case of Mars, if any oxygen were present it would probably have combined with the surface of the planet.

Both Jupiter and Saturn have abundant atmospheres. Therefore, as far as atmosphere is concerned, life would be possible on Jupiter and Saturn *if* one could conceive of a type of life capable of existing in a medium rich in ammonia and methane. As far as our type of life is concerned, both ammonia and methane are poisonous materials—tending to destroy rather than encourage life. Yet, oxygen may be present in a rarefied state, and if it could be possible to conceive of an animal capable of utilizing this oxygen, also the important carbon atom present in methane and the important nitrogen atom present in ammonia, we could probably conceive of a type of life existing on Jupiter and Saturn.

On the whole, it appears that there is always something wrong with the other planets in our solar system, in regards to their suitability for meeting the requirements needed for a type of life resembling our own.

Having established the fact that the earth is best suited for life, we are now in a position to ask the following important question: How did life first begin on this earth?

There are many interesting theories concerning the origin of life on this earth. None of these theories can ever pass the theory stage to become an established fact; they are destined to remain nothing more than speculative possibilities. Were we even able to go to our laboratories and produce life artificially—how could we even then be sure that life had been produced in a similar method? How could we be sure another method did not exist; a more efficient method—the one that was really used to produce life on this earth.

According to Hemholtz and Kelvin, life did not originate on our planet—but was brought to this earth (perhaps in the form of an extremely durable spore) from some other planet.

"Are there not spores and seeds today, capable of resisting severe temperatures?"

"Have there not been cases where spores of certain microbes have been kept alive for years, even in the almost complete absence of moisture and oxygen?"

"Why could not then a spore have been introduced to this earth—perhaps encased in some material, perhaps a meteor?" So might have argued these scientists, if alive today. A microbe spore has actually been found encased in coal, and was capable of being thawed back to life. It could have possibly existed millions of years in this spore stage.

However, as H. H. Newman would point out, this only pushes back the question of how life originated one step further. Or, assuming life did come to us from another planet, then, how did life originate on that planet?

Let us now consider some theories that start from basic elements, and at a time when the earth was still in its superheated condition. They presume no pre-existing life, but start out from "scratch."

Up to now we have followed the material presented by Horatio H. Newman in his book entitled, *Outline of General Zoology*. We shall continue to do so for these next two theories, because it would be hard to find a more honest book for source material.

According to Pfluger, the atoms of carbon and nitrogen tended to combine, when the earth was first in its superheated, incandescent condition. This combination of carbon and nitrogen atoms produced cyanogen (C N). It so happens that (C N) forms the very core of the protein molecule, and hence of protoplasm itself. Pfluger conceived the addition of this (C N) to a carbohydrate-like substance as the step of life formation.

According to Moore, the earth cooled gradually and hence permitted a series of chemical combinations to occur between the elements. In this manner, only those combinations that resulted in compounds of a more stable character at high temperatures, combined at first. Thus oxides first appeared. Then carbonates, then the various organic colloids. Then organic colloids. Many organic colloids aggregated into the most complex of all chemical forms—namely, protoplasm. And, since protoplasm equals life, the net result of these chemical combinations, as the earth gradually cooled, was *life itself*.

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The BRACELET

by

DORIS THOMAS

THE fourth time I met Sheila—it was at a restaurant—she was wearing a bracelet, a great, massive metal band.

"Look," I said. "I thought you didn't like jewelry."

"I don't." Sheila's eyes were innocent.

I pointed to the heavy geegaw covering her slender left wrist. "Just exactly what do you call that?"

Although I'd known Sheila only a week, it was already a matter of pride with me that she didn't go for the foolish ornaments that the average girl decks herself out in. Sheila didn't need them. Sheila was a natural beauty. Her deep amber eyes, her honey-colored hair—

Her gaze followed my finger, until she saw what it was pointing at.

"Oh that."

I nodded.

"That's not jewelry, Todd. It—it's just a—a bracelet."

I got the impression right then that she'd been about to say something quite different about it, but changed her mind.

"No," I said. "It's not jewelry, any more than pork is a pig and beef is a cow. But it's a piece of it, and I don't see how you can stand there and tell me anything else—"

"Suppose I don't then."

Sheila's tone was crisp. I stared at her.

"Don't what?"

"Stand here. Suppose you take me home."

That made me mad.

I snatched my hat off the hatrack, slammed it on my head, helped her into her coat, and drove her all the way to her aunt's house without either of us saying another word.

We said good-night—just that and nothing else. I could have kicked myself afterward, and maybe Sheila could, too—herself, I mean—for I was leaving town the next day and didn't know when I'd be back.

But we just said good-night—and she turned and ran in the house like the devil was hounding her heels.

NEXT morning I got off to an early start. But Rex, up ahead of me, fixed a warm breakfast which took some of the scowl off my face.

"You'll make some gal a swell wife someday," I kidded him, throwing an affectionate arm about his shoulder. We'd been buddies in college, Rex and I. Still were, for that matter, though I hadn't seen Rex for several years, and we didn't even keep very close track of each other.

"Couldn't let the old genealogist set out with an empty stomach," he grinned.

Rex was like that. Always doing something for somebody. As soon as I had let him know I'd be in his town a

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Was Masters a brilliant attorney or an evil necromanticist? Could he really control a human mind with a bracelet?

She seemed in a trance, going through some strange rite

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few days, looking up a couple of family pedigrees, he insisted I come and bunk with him. He wouldn't hear to anything else. Not only that, he'd taken me the rounds of the town, and incidentally, introduced me to Sheila.

"Speaking of delving into family mysteries," Rex went on, "how did you ever make out with your own? You haven't mentioned—"

My lips drew into a line.

"I didn't."

"No luck, eh? That's too bad." Rex smoked his pipe a minute in silence. "I suppose you're still working on it?"

I scowled.

"And will be! Till I find the guilty man, or—"

Rex nodded. He had a lot of confidence in me.

"You'll do it. I'm betting on you, boy."

"Thanks."

I kept wishing he hadn't brought up that subject. Not with my mood already as black as my coffee. But Rex, well meaning as he was, seemed doomed that morning to stick his nose into everything I didn't want mentioned.

He stretched and let out a contented yawn.

"I guess, Todd, we'll be seeing a lot of you around the village—now."

"Now?"

"Sure, now." Rex grinned. "Now that you've something more interesting than family trees to bring you here."

I bristled.

"What have I got?"

His grin broadened.

"If you don't know—"

"If you're speaking of Sheila—"

"Aren't you?"

"No, that's all off." I shook my head. "Definitely."

But Rex wouldn't believe me.

"Don't be discouraged, Todd. You've made more headway than any of us. When Sheila Masters stays in town with her aunt a whole week—just to be near you—"

"That's your interpretation."

"You know it's not far from wrong. I can't remember her leaving her father that long at a time since her mother died. They're unusually close, you know."

I didn't know; but I'd suspected it. It wasn't only that Sheila spoke often of her father, who was a prominent attorney; it was the way she spoke of him. She'd told me a lot, too, about Masters Hall, their country estate about thirty-five miles from the village, and Sheila'd promised to invite me to one of her week-end parties there. And then she'd gone high-hat on me and spoiled everything!

Rex lit his pipe.

"Yes, Sheila's a strange girl—one day she sees you on the street; the next, those gorgeous eyes look right through you—don't even seem to see you—"

I guessed I'd been fooled on Sheila. Her unusual disposition—that was the thing that had first drawn me to her more than to other girls—that and her dislike of jewelry. I thought I'd never met anybody so thoroughly lovable—so even-tempered. Maybe Rex was right about her, though. Certainly she'd had little reason to spoil our last evening—over a bracelet!

"No, I'm through in the village, Rex. Don't know when I'll be seeing you, fellow."

I meant that, too. I intended never to see the village again.

A MONTH wore the edges off my resolution. Anyhow, I'd finally thought of some more business to take me back to Sheila's home town.

So I drove in late one afternoon, put up at the Village Inn—I'd made up my

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mind I wouldn't let Rex talk me into imposing on his hospitality again—and set out to find him so we could eat dinner together. But he'd left town to take a new job just three days earlier, and hadn't left his new address. I moped away most of the evening before it occurred to me to wonder whether I might have lost track of Sheila, too, by not keeping in touch with her— I didn't lose much more time in getting to the nearest telephone.

The upshot was that we started all over again, and I lingered another week in the village. Again Sheila came to stay at her aunt's home, and we saw each other every day. We never mentioned the thing that had parted us—her bracelet. I decided I'd been right in the first place about her natural bent of mind. I never knew anyone more amiable. I was sure only fair sailing lay ahead of us now.

But the night before I was to leave again, Sheila insisted we go to a party. She said she was obliged to appear for a while, and she wanted me there, too—we'd sneak out early together. . . . So far, so good, but— Sheila shoved up wearing that bracelet!

It was uglier than I remembered it to be. The two translucent green gems with which it was set seemed suddenly to resemble two baleful green eyes. I shivered. The thing was beginning to get under my skin.

But I made up my mind it shouldn't separate us this time. I'd take a different tack with Sheila.

"Oh, ho," I said. "The slave bracelet—come back again." And I managed to laugh.

Sheila laughed with me. And that was all. She didn't r e m a r k as to whether it was or wasn't; she gave no reason for its reappearance on this, our last night together. Instead, she took my arm, and asked me to dance.

I began to wonder if it *was* a slave bracelet—if some other chap had given it to her; some chap she couldn't forget. . . .

We danced a while, together and with other people. Finally we went to sit out a dance. I don't know whether it was the full moon, or the April night, or simply because Sheila was Sheila, but I forgot all about the bracelet then. With my arm about her, and her head resting contentedly on my shoulder, we sat there quite a while, just listening to the music.

"Happy?" I asked finally.

Sheila nodded then, and put her arms around my neck. The touch of her warm flesh against mine was pleasant indeed. But suddenly I felt a band of coldness against it; such frigid coldness that I felt for an instant some force not of this earth had somehow come close and touched me. . . .

"That bracelet!"

My attitude, my tone, must both have been more hostile than I meant them to be, for suddenly we were on our feet, and Sheila's bracelet was gleaming in the moonlight between us, its two great green eyes glaring straight at me.

"My bracelet still annoys you?"

"No." I started to deny it; then changed my mind. "Frankly, it does, Sheila. I—I don't like it."

"Really?"

Her voice was now as cold as the metal encircling her arm.

"I don't even see how you can bear to wear it! No matter who gave it to you. No matter how much they may mean—"

Her eyes, dark in the moonlight, opened wide as though I'd struck her.

Without reply she turned and ran quickly back to the ballroom. Though I followed immediately, I did not find her that night. When I asked our hostess about her, she informed me that

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Sheila had gone home.

"Alone?" I couldn't help asking.

"Alone," nodded my hostess, looking at me a little strangely.

THAT night I couldn't sleep again, for trying to settle in my mind whether it was some deep attachment to her bracelet or just plain wilfulness that made Sheila wear it in spite of my expressed aversion to it. The first thing in the morning I drove straight to her aunt's home. I had committed myself to see Sheila once more, to find out for all time exactly what that bracelet meant in her life.

As I drove up in front of the house, Sheila was coming out of it. She was followed by what I took to be her chauffeur, loaded down with the various articles of luggage.

I jumped out of my car and went to meet her.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Without seeing me again?"

Sheila evaded that.

"I've been away a week. Dad sent for me."

"But you were leaving without seeing me?" I had to press the question. Sheila met my eyes finally.

"I thought you'd gone."

More hurt than ever to find her running away from me, I nevertheless made her go back into the house where we could talk. She told the chauffeur to wait at the car; she'd be only a few minutes.

Inside, I helped her off with her coat, and we went into the living room where we sat and stared miserably at each other. At least I stared miserably at Sheila. For the most part she still avoided my eyes, and I thought I understood her reason. She was still wearing the bracelet.

"Sheila." I moved over to a lounge, drawing her along with me, where we could sit near together. "Sheila, let's never quarrel again—over that bracelet!"

"All right." Sheila's agreement was instant.

"You mean it?"

"Of course I do. Just stop, Todd. You're the one who's been doing all the quarreling about it."

I stiffened. I choked back some harsh words. I made another appeal.

"But why must you wear it, Sheila? Why?"

"Because I wish to."

"But it's hideous, Sheila. It makes you—like it. It changes you. When you wear it, you're a different person. It does change you!"

I hadn't meant to say that much. I was hardly conscious that I'd thought that much.

"Really, Todd." Sheila rose suddenly, her lovely eyes filled with scorn. "You're giving yourself a complex. It doesn't become you."

A PUNCH in the jaw would have been more acceptable from Sheila than ridicule. I stared unhappily, unbelievingly, up at her—until I noticed a strange phenomenon. Her eyes were no longer amber! They had taken on the curious green of the stones which adorned her bracelet, and which I found so revolting. Moreover, they were regarding me now with the same hardly concealed enmity, almost hatred! I gazed down at the gems, and back into Sheila's eyes, and down at the gems again. I fancied their evil orbs blinked at me! I passed my hand across my forehead.

I could only gaze at her in wonderment. Was she right, or was I? Was the complex hers, or mine? At any rate, there was no more we could say to each other. A wall had risen between us

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which I could not surmount — more solid, I feared, than any of brick and mortar. I could no longer feel near Sheila. It was as though we were viewing each other clearly, yet from different spheres. I got the preposterous notion that the longer she wore that bracelet, the farther from me she would go . . . I was about to wrest it from her wrist, but the malevolent jewel eyes stopped me. I could have sworn they blinked ominously! Sudden, strange terror filled my heart.

MY WORK suffered severely for six months while I tried to forget Sheila and that business of the bracelet. Family trees came to fruition minus important limbs. Some of them sprouted strange offshoots which obviously never belonged to them.

I came to the conclusion that Sheila had in all probability been right. The complex was likely mine — brought about by hurt vanity, or jealousy, or both. If love bracelet it was, a half year might have freed Sheila.

In October I dropped her a card. And though she swore she never got it, she was at the station when I arrived—to meet some week-end guest who fortunately did not appear.

"Can I give you a lift, Todd? Or better—can we put you up? Since Mike didn't come, we'll need an extra man."

Snow was thick in the air. A covering of snowflakes clung wetly to her great fur coat and small fur hat, and even on her eyelashes. Looking at her, a feeling of curious excitement took hold of me.

"You've been away a long time, Todd."

"Did you miss me?"

Sheila was, as usual, noncommittal.

"I guess the village doesn't draw you often. But after all, it's not a commercial town." Was she trying to find out if I'd missed her?

"Mine isn't a commercial business."

She looked at me.

"What is your business?"

"I thought you knew."

"You told me, of course. But I've forgotten."

"Meeting people."

"Meeting people!" She shook her head. "No, that wasn't it. It was something odd, though—"

"You're thinking of genealogy—my side-line. I'm looking for someone, Sheila. Besides you, I mean. But you've kept yourself so in my thoughts, I couldn't find them."

Sheila was too well-bred to press me as to my real meaning, but she sensed that disturbing truths lay beneath what seemed to be only half-truths, and I could see that she was considerably intrigued by them.

We were turning into a driveway beside a great stone house. It was a gloomy stone house, I decided.

Sheila led the way indoors, where, in a huge high-ceilinged hall, I felt the sense of gloom increase. I began to marvel that any person as bright and shining as Sheila could have sprung from such surroundings.

"Take off your coat, Todd. Our home is your home."

Sheila removed her hat, was fumbling with the buttons of her fur greatcoat. I jumped to help her. I was really quite agog to see— But the removal of the coat told me nothing. She wore a tweed suit whose long-sleeved jacket covered both wrists completely.

"You will meet father at dinner. I think we'd better dress now."

I CHANGED in a dither of overcuriousness. That I should let the wearing or not of a simple gewgaw set me in such a state of suspense! But was

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it a gewgaw to Sheila? Or did that curious band of metal with its seemingly blinking eyes still bind her in some fashion—to whom? Or to what? That was the disquieting notion which from the start had caused me concern, and despite all my resolutions had sprung up again with my discovery of the somberness of her home.

The other guests had not arrived, and dinner was served to the three of us in a huge-beamed dining room, whose many lights did not dispel its sense of murkiness. Sheila's father was as mysterious as his house. He was a small man, with such large heavy-looking glasses, and such piercing eyes behind them, that I couldn't help getting another odd thought: Those glasses were some sort of shield to him, as was this gloomy house, perhaps even Sheila—

"Sheila tells me you're from Nevada."

The piercing eyes were looking straight into me. I started to nod, but instead a lie popped from my lips. It seemed completely involuntary, the act of some strange inner compulsion.

"No, I'm from the East."

Sheila was remonstrating.

"But, Todd. I'm sure you told me—"

"Oh, I've been in Nevada."

Sheila's father studied me an instant longer, then returned his attention to his food. That was the first and last interest he showed in me. Sheila seemed unduly apologetic to both of us.

"Sorry, Dad. Todd, I thought it would be the meeting of natives. Dad's from there, you know."

He looked at her briefly. Was there warning in his glance? At any rate, Sheila instantly changed the subject. The remainder of the meal was depressing. Sheila and I had the conversation all to ourselves, but we both seemed ill at ease. I was still in complete doubt about her bracelet. She wore a black glittering jacket over her well-cut black dinner dress, under which her wrists were again wholly hidden!

In the next three days I discovered that if Sheila still had a penchant for a certain metal bracelet, she had likewise a penchant for long sleeves. Hers was apparently a long-sleeved wardrobe. In day dresses, evening dresses, even sweaters—I dared not ask her about the piece of jewelry, after our quarrel because of it.

It was my fourth day—the next to my last as their guest—before I ascertained, quite by accident, that Sheila and her bracelet were as inseparable as ever.

WE WERE sitting in the conservatory, away from Sheila's other guests. We had been too busy seeing a very great deal of each other. Indeed, she had tried, and I had tried to let her, remember her manifeld duties as hostess, but without much success. And now we were engaged in the selfsame struggle—between our full knowledge that we should return to the others, and our utter disinclination to do so.

"Sheila. Have you ever thought of marriage?"

She stared at me a second; then laughed.

"Who hasn't?"

"Have you thought of marrying me?"

I was toying as I spoke with something which encircled Sheila's arm under her sleeve — something altogether hard and cold and metallic — toying with it absently. I was wondering whether I could bring myself if Sheila said yes to face the disconcerting eyes and curt, disinterested voice of Maynard Masters to ask him for his daughter.

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But Sheila just laughed again.

"Don't let Dad think you're a suitor, Todd. Or out you go!"

It sounded like a caution, but she tossed it off so lightly, I couldn't make up my mind how much truth, if any, lay behind it. I couldn't decide, either, whether to be upset over it or relieved. I was sure I loved Sheila by this time, but this was the nearest I'd ever come to a proposal; and the reaction nonplussed me.

My fingers still picked idly at the gewgaw on Sheila's wrist, but she was as unconscious of their movement as I. Until abruptly somehow the clasp was loosened, and to our mutual surprise and horror, Sheila's bracelet rolled to the floor with a terrible clatter and came to rest finally between our feet. Its two demon-eyes stared up at us relentlessly.

For an instant I was too stunned even to pick it up. Apparently Sheila was the same. But my thoughts worked madly. Sheila's bracelet! My answer! I retrieved it, was unloosing the clasp— I was afraid to look at Sheila. If she thought my act deliberate— But at last I managed a glance.

She still sat as though petrified, but her eyes were not looking at me. Maynard Masters stood in the entrance. As he stared at me, I could feel myself slowly freeze. I strove to grin at him, offer a sally, but I could not even moisten my lips.

He did not stand there long, but approached us with quick, furious strides and caught up the bracelet.

"Who is responsible for this?" He was looking from one to the other of us searchingly, as he examined the piece of jewelry. His glance came to rest upon me. "You, sir?"

"Father!"

Sheila had at last found her voice. I could hear the entreaty in it. And warning. If my offense had been as heinous as her father was making it appear, she at least did not wish me to know.

But he remained unrelenting.

"You, sir?"

Sheila stood up resolutely.

"No, no, father. I did it myself. Somehow I opened the clasp— It fell—"

As he turned upon her, I thrust myself between them.

"Nothing of the sort. Of course I did it, sir. Unintentionally, I assure you."

He was searching my face again. Some of the rage had left his. Still, I was not sure but that it was preferable to the unutterable iciness which succeeded it.

"I've never known Sheila to lie."

"Only to protect me, sir."

"And why should Sheila protect you?"

"She shouldn't. But you know, sir, Sheila'd never take off that bracelet— against your instructions."

IT WAS a bolt in the dark, and I launched it with more boldness than I felt. For I was determined to pierce that darkness. Concerning the bracelet, I had discarded my first notion that link was one of romance. No, it was more powerful than that, and ominous, and, I believed, closer home—

I saw my bolt strike its mark. Masters flinched—as at something wholly unbelievable — before he whirled, his face dark with wrath, upon Sheila again.

"You told him?"

"Nothing—father."

Too late he saw that he had caught himself, had himself aroused my suspicions and confirmed them. Momentarily he lost all self-control; his voice was thick and evil as he addressed me.

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"By what authority do you meddle in our affairs?"

"Father! Remember—!"

He was moving toward me.

"By what authority—"

Temporarily at least the man was mad.

Then, amazingly. Maynard Masters passed his palm across his brow, and his evil mood seemed to pass with it.

"You will excuse me, Todd." His apology took the form of a command, but his tone was ingratiating. "You will perhaps understand when you know that this bracelet is an heirloom—of enormous value—to me. My wife's—my mother's—her mother's—and back and back— And now my little Sheila's."

Sheila was looking at him strangely. He fastened the bracelet upon her wrist as he ended and I saw a momentary fear in her eyes; then he left us alone with an hospitable gesture.

"Ask Todd to stay a few days longer. And all your guests, Sheila."

He was gone. We faced each other.

"Will you stay, Todd?"

"Of course. If you want me."

"You know I do." I was about to smother her in my arms, but she held me back.

"Todd! If you do love me, forget what just happened. And what you said about marriage. I can't marry you, Todd. And I can't explain anything. Don't mention it again."

THE next morning Sheila and her father were up early, but so was I. None of us looked as though we had exceeded our quota of sleep the night before, but we all greeted each other cheerfully, and as though the incident in the conservatory had never happened; and as soon as we'd finished breakfast, Sheila and I went for a gallop.

The air was crisp and cold and clean, and it seemed to me decidedly bracing to get away from that bleak pile of stone masonry even for a time. Frost still shone on the ground in spots where the sun hadn't gotten at it, and we passed a huge pumpkin patch which set us talking of Halloween and the celebration which was being planned in the village.

As soon as I could bring the conversation round to it casually, I ventured a question which had been on my mind most of the night.

"Who sleeps in your attic, Sheila?"

"Attic?" Sheila hesitated in her canter, and reined in her filly, a little, and I followed suit. "We have no attic." I could not tell whether or not she was vexed with me. "Why do you ask?"

Instead of replying, I pressed another question.

"Your third floor, then. Do your servants sleep there?"

"Why, no," said Sheila slowly. "They don't sleep in the house. But you must have some reason, Todd, for—"

"There was a light at the third floor windows. Almost all night."

It seemed to me that Sheila looked startled.

"Where were you?"

"Oh, I was strolling around—"

"In the night? In the cold?"

Our horses were barely moving now; I was noting and weighing Sheila's every word and expression, as I was sure she was mine.

"I couldn't sleep. I thought the air might help me—"

Sheila's troubled eyes looked deeply into mine.

"But you said windows, Todd." I nodded. "Our third floor has windows only on two sides—the front and rear. To see the rear windows, you must be

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in the thicket—behind the house—"

I nodded.

Sheila leaned briefly from her horse to touch my arm in a sort of supplicatory gesture.

"Don't go into the thicket—at night, Todd. It—it's not safe."

My jaw squared stubbornly.

"Why isn't it safe?"

Sheila only gazed at me a moment; then shrugged. The fencing began again.

"I've always been afraid of that thicket. Ever since I was a little girl. The thicket was so dark. Even the moon couldn't look into it— And that third-floor room was my nursery."

"Can the moon look into those third floor windows, Sheila?"

"Todd! What — w h a t d o y o u mean?"

"Aren't they heavily curtained?"

"They have drapes, of course. But— Todd, whatever are you imagining?"

"That's it. I can't imagine what your father does there all hours of the night."

Sheila did not like to lie.

"It's father's sanctuary. He often spends the night there—going over his cases. When he does, Todd, I spend the night there with him. I help him. I was with him last night. Now . . ." she cast me a glance of full defiance . . . "if you still suspect something dishonorable goes on there . . ."

She flicked her filly, and set off at a gallop.

AS SOON as we returned from our ride, I pleaded an errand in the village, and was about to set out afoot when Sheila heard about it and insisted I take the station wagon. The cars were all in use, she said, but the wagon was not, and I must drive it.

I hesitated.

The business I was going on was tricky to say the least. It seemed to me risky enough to ferret into a criminal lawyer's habits and doings among his own townsfolk, but to drive up and accost them in that lawyer's own station wagon—I would be bound to arouse suspicion. Besides, there was something inside me that shied at using a man's personal belongings to help me pin the goods on him!

But I could see Sheila was hurt.

"Can't you see—I want you back—as quickly as possible?"

She gave my hand a loving little squeeze which raised my temperature unbelievably. Just a touch from her—

It was the first time Sheila had intimated she loved me, too. I drove the station wagon.

There was no safe place to park it on the outskirts of town, so I left it in the Square, and spent the next couple of hours convincing myself that Maynard Masters' neighbors and townspeople were as fully convinced of his integrity as his own daughter. I still wasn't, but I could find not a single dissenter from the general estimate of him as an attorney so brilliant, so discerning, so uncanny that he never lost a case.

They admitted, though, it was his practice to defend only rich clients, never poor men nor needy ones. Masters himself made no bones of that. He stated simply that he could not do poor men justice—with no adequate funds to dig into all the angles—and he refused to prosecute cases wherein justice could not be done. A man of true conscience, the people assured me.

I found one man who had a decided opinion, however.

"I've been watching that eminent attorney for quite a number of years now and he seems to have a formula. Dark horse gets the sentence; client goes free; Masters gets the money. Not a part

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of the money—all the money. No matter how wealthy a client when Masters takes over, he's a pauper when Masters gets through with him. And free. A free pauper!"

"I don't get it," I said, "about the dark horse."

"You don't? Well, even in cases where it's open and shut that the accused is guilty, Masters is able to free him by putting his finger on the real criminal. He's uncanny! *Uncanny,* I tell you!"

I went back to the station wagon, and was driving slowly back along the Village's main street when a slight, elderly man came running from one of the shops that lined it, calling and motioning frantically for me to stop and wait a moment.

He came up to the wagon, breathless but exultant.

"Hi, buddy. Will you carry this package to Mr. Masters, and save me the trip? That's a good fellow."

He thrust the tiny packet into my hand. "I'll thank you kindly, sir. Just tell him—from the locksmith."

"The locksmith." I stared at him and at the package and back to him again. What lock could possibly fit into such a small parcel? I determined to find out. "Oh, yes, yes. The lock he's expecting, I suppose?"

"No, no. The key, sir. The extra key. He's most anxious to have it. And I neglected to send it to Miss Sheila."

"The extra key to . . ." I held my breath a minute, ". . . the bracelet?"

The old locksmith smiled.

"That's it, sir. The bracelet. Miss Sheila's bracelet, sir."

He saluted me and returned to his shop. Slipping the packet he had entrusted to me into my breast pocket, I drove quickly back toward Masters Hall.

I SLEPT soundly that whole night, quite dead to the world, exactly as though I'd been doped. But I kept dreaming the same dream over and over. I was still out to get Masters, but every time I aimed at him, there was Sheila in the way. I must have shot him fifty times before morning, only to discover I'd shot Sheila instead! But nothing woke me till I heard a bell ringing. It rang and rang and rang so persistently that I got mad and answered and found it was Sheila on the house phone. I was glad to hear her voice.

"Todd." She sounded relieved, too, when I answered. "I thought perhaps you'd taken to somnambulism and wandered entirely away from us."

"No. No strolls last night," I assured her, still yawning. "What time is it?"

"Past noon, sleepy-head. I'll order your breakfast with my lunch. If you'll hurry."

My alarm clock, set for 3 A. M., had gone off, run down, and I hadn't even heard it!

The day was full of other surprises. When I joined Sheila, I noticed immediately that she was wearing a dress whose sleeves were cut to reveal the sweet shapeliness of her arms. The bracelet and the lock which so newly bound it fast seemed to me to loom upon her slim wrist more noticeably—more menacingly—than ever.

Sheila had accepted the key which I delivered to her from the locksmith without comment or explanation. How her father had felt about the old locksmith betraying his addition to the family heirloom, as he had called it, I had not learned.

It was a gay breakfast—a gay day, for that matter. Sheila was holding something secret, as I could see at once. But she kept me wondering until

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I asked again for the station wagon. That was in the evening. We were in her old play room, in the basement of the big house. Sheila raised herself in the hammock to look at me.

"Not unless I go with you."

"But it's business, dear."

I wanted to look up one of those paupers I had heard about—those free paupers. Any one of them would do.

"I'll help you."

"No, no," I refused hastily. "I can't bother you with business."

"Oh, that," said Sheila. A roguish gleam came into her amber eyes. "Come again, Todd. I'm on to your business, you know."

She'd caught me fair between the eyes. I sat there, astraddle of her old seesaw, not knowing what to say. I thought I'd better proceed cautiously.

"On to my—?"

"Yes, Todd. That 'business' and 'side-line' talk of yours. You had me wondering for a while." If Sheila had been speaking another language, I'd hardly have been more at sea. She laughed. "Don't look so distressed, darling. I was busy last night, if you weren't. And now I know all about you."

I GOT up from the seesaw, and went over to look down at her in the hammock.

"You've heard something, Sheila. What is it?"

She threw out her arms happily.

"Not something, Todd. Everything! Your whole life. I've looked into every nook and cranny of it, and it's good, darling. You're just like Dad. Never thinking of yourself. I'm so glad, Todd."

My mouth hardened. What wouldn't money buy? If they could explore a man's life in a few days! But perhaps all this was only a come on of Sheila's—to make me tell her. As yet she'd specified nothing really concrete—

She did, however, at once.

"It's simple enough why your real business is 'meeting people,'" she sighed contentedly, leaning back again in the hammock, "when you know. But how you expect to find your father's murderer without his finding you—and under your right name—"

"It isn't."

"Isn't what?" Sheila stopped swinging.

"Isn't my right name."

"Todd!" She sat up again. "How could you!" She regarded me now with deep reproach. "Propose, I mean. Why, we'd not be legally married!"

Sheila was quite disregarding the fact that she'd refused me! I smiled wryly.

"Of course I'd have told you."

I began to ask her questions. I found she knew all she had intimated. My father . . . his murder by his partner for a paltry gold mine which paid very little in the end, but which nevertheless gave the murderer his start and a chance to leave the state and establish himself elsewhere . . . my unremitting efforts to hunt him down . . . Sheila bared the book of my life to me shamelessly, quite unembarrassed at having had me investigated. Instead, scraping the foot hanging out of the hammock thoughtfully along the cement of the play room floor, she seemed inclined to make the most of my two or three slight deceptions.

"Why did you tell us you weren't from Nevada?"

"I'm not sure."

"Don't you trust us?" She'd stopped swinging again.

"I trust *you*," I said pointedly.

"Oh!" Sheila jumped up in quick pique, and ran out the open door of the play room, which was behind me. I

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thought she'd gone, but a minute later I heard a noise and looked around, and saw she'd come back again.

"I don't mind telling you, Todd—" she had poised herself in the doorway for a flying exit, which she made the instant she'd had her say "—that you're carrying your aversion to father entirely too far. Entirely!"

I wondered if I was. Sitting down again on the seesaw in Sheila's old play room, amidst all the relics of what must have been her thoroughly happy and normal childhood, I seemed very far removed from the avarice, and hate, and villainy which were responsible for all the past's tragedy and for the pilgrimage I'd set myself on.

AGAIN I heard a slight noise behind me. I turned, expecting Sheila. It was not Sheila, but Maynard Masters who stood surveying me from the doorway.

I could not account for the look of total hatred which I saw flash across his face as I turned. Was it solely because of Sheila? Or was there some further—

He began to advance into the play room, smiling his thin smile as he came.

"Sheila is not here?"

I got up.

"Shall I find her for you?"

"No, no. It's really you I'm looking for." He took my arm in what was meant to appear a friendly gesture. "I thought perhaps—another nightcap—my boy—"

I shook my head. I had already regretted our nightcap of the night before.

"I believe not. It keeps me awake."

"How strange." Again I had that sense of his shrewd eyes through their glasses looking into the very marrow of me. Yet he was not ready for a showdown, I found. At least, not there in the play room. He shrugged. "Well—As you like. But come with me to my study while I have one. Sheila tells me your life has been most tragic. I want to hear more of it."

IT was a couple of hours after I left Masters in his study before I saw the lights come on in the third floor windows. I had meanwhile kept to my bedroom, having learned from Lovelace, the servant, that Sheila had already retired to hers. Listening patiently, I heard when Masters entered his room, across the hall from mine, and noticed the sound of a key turning in its lock.

I turned the key in mine.

Then I threw myself across my bed, fully dressed, to wait for a reasonable length of time to elapse; for I was certain Maynard Masters would go about none of his nocturnal affairs until he could feel assured he had given me ample time to fall asleep.

The complete darkness of the room seemed to whet my thinking, and I began to wonder against what a man must guard his bedroom at night in his own house, with only his own daughter and her friends and a lifelong servant present to do him harm. Lovelace, I had found, did sleep in the stone house with us, although all the other servants were lodged on the second floor of the garage. Lovelace, it seemed, had manifold duties. Butler of Masters Hall by day, he became his master's valet by night, even sleeping in the adjoining room to his. It was a strange arrangement, and brought the thought to me again: valet or bodyguard?

But why should a reputable, brilliant attorney need a bodyguard?

He had just taken a new case. Sheila had told me of it that day. A society woman and her maid had been found murdered, shot cruelly to death, with no possibility of their deaths resultng from

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suicide. Yet every window in the ten-room home had been locked from the inside. Every door had been locked with a special lock to which only the son and husband, besides the deceased, had carried keys! The son, returning home in the evening, had found the bodies and notified the police. The father first learned of the crime the morning following, on his arrival home from a business trip. Neither son nor father had holeproof alibis. Masters had been retained to defend both of them. A new test of his ingenuity! To free double defendants with no outsider involved with whom to link the murders. Masters, I suspected, would be working overtime in his third-floor sanctuary this—

A noise at my door put a sudden end to my speculation. The knob was turning slowly, almost silently. I did not move, I hardly breathed, upon the bed, and presently I fancied I heard footsteps, again almost silent, going up the staircase, or perhaps they had gone downward. I waited a while longer, then let myself noiselessly out of my bedroom, went down the stairs to the front entrance, and out into the night.

THE moon was with me. Ordinarily at its full at this period of the month, tonight it was overcast. As I made my way to the thicket behind the house, I could see hardly two feet in front of me. There were no lights as yet in the third floor of the many-windowed house. In fact, there were no lights in the house at all. Even the usual night lights had been turned off. Again I wondered why. I hoped I would not come head-on into Masters, pursuing his nefarious practices without rather than within his house.

The thicket loomed suddenly in front of me, and I went into it gladly. My wait after that was not long. The windows at the rear of the third floor of the old stone house suddenly came alight; then, at once, one by one, were dimmed, until their lights were barely visible. Undraped by day, Masters obviously did not neglect to pull their drapes across them when he went to the room at night. Yet I still thought it was worth a trial.

I had become fairly convinced of the outcome of my present undertaking before I started for the top of the tree which would let me look straight in through the French doors of that third-floor room, if they were not too heavily curtained.

I was right. The drapes which covered the doors were not transparent, and they had been drawn with meticulous care. I gazed across the space which separated me from the small decorative balcony onto which the French doors led, and wished that I, like Tarzan, could leap to it. But there was no hope of that, so I climbed back down the tree, returned to my room, and went to bed. I had made up my mind. Tomorrow night, with my skeleton key . . .

THE third-floor room almost exceeded my expectations of it. Illumined only by the moon, which was not obscured tonight, almost everything in it was nevertheless distinctly visible. The walls—draped with the same dark rich-looking hangings which were drawn over its windows at night; the luxuriously carpeted dais at the end of the room opposite the full-length French doors; the carved, throne-like chair which was the sole article of furniture upon the dais; the antique desk and table which stood on either side of the doors and were covered with mementoes from all parts of the globe; all combined to give the room a decidedly theatrical and exciting appearance.

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Sheila had told me of her father's special mementoes—oddities gathered from many lands in his travels among them—and I had wondered where and why he kept them hidden away. Now I knew—at least, the where of it.

But I could not linger to gape. I must still cross the long room in full moonlight to reach the French doors and balcony, and I must do so before the massive door at the head of the front stairway opened, or—

Without further thought, I strode swiftly toward my goal, my eyes riveted upon that great carved door which must not open—not yet— My steps were noiseless, cushioned by the same deep, rich carpeting which covered the dais. I traversed most of the distance and my eyes were looking forward now toward my next obstacle—those French doors. Were they locked, and how? Was the key in the lock? If not, would my skeleton key open it readily? . . .

I was passing the desk now. Brass glittered there, and precious stones, and silver, and twinkling glass—and gold! Even as I unlocked the French windows, it hit me.

I was suddenly rooted in my tracks. I could move no farther. I forgot Masters, my mission, that massive closed door which could open in a trice— I forgot all that I had been recently bent upon by a sudden and shocking reminder of the project that had absorbed my thoughts and energies so long before—

Fascinated, I drew nearer to the desk and its extraordinary treasures. No—that strangely shaped piece of gold—my glance had not deceived me. There, in the very center of the desk, the very heart of Masters' cache, lay the companion to the object I carried always with me in my wallet!

For a minute my mind was stunned. And then it flew back with astonishing directness to the pitch of my conversation with Masters in his study the previous evening.

"But how shall you know your father's murderer—if you find him?"

I had not told him how.

My trembling hand reached out for this one of the two means I had counted on to establish the identity of my father's murderer. Common sense had told me frequently, as it must have told any thinking person, that such sure evidence would certainly have been destroyed. No killer would ever keep near him the instrument whereby to convict himself! And yet I hoped. Killers again and again had done this very thing—against all reason, all explanation—a sort of challenge perhaps to their own pride in their accomplishment without detection.

And Masters had done it. Something somehow had impelled him to preserve the small gold miner's pick of which the duplicate had been made for my father—a sort of sentimental gesture—emblems, those small golden picks, made of the first gold from their mine, and engraved each with the name of its respective owner—emblems of a coming prosperity which had been quickly and horribly prevented in my father's case.

MASTERS' small telltale pick seared the palm of my hand as I looked for and confirmed its engraving. M. M. Marsters. I could make it out even in the moonlight. He, too, had seen fit to change his name—a trifle. Masters—Marsters. Strange I had not previously noted the similarity. The man, it seemed, had a predisposition to skate upon thin ice.

Well, I would soon crack it under him!

The thought returned me to the present again, and just in time. A key was

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being inserted in the ponderous carved door. I could hear it turning. With one leap I reached the French doors, wrested them open. Fortunate that I had previously t u r n e d the lock—I jumped out of sight past the glass doors, closed them, and squeezed back against the wall at the railing of the tiny balcony. I trusted to Masters to follow his custom, to draw the drapes across the windows and French doors at once. And I trusted that he would give no very observant glance toward the balcony.

I was not disappointed. The man must have crossed directly to the pull-cords to bar the outside night and any possibility of prying eyes. As the drapes slid t o g e t h e r to cover the French windows, I began to breathe again. The gold pick was still in my clenched fist, and I slipped it into my left-hand breast pocket. And then once more I stopped breathing! For Maynard Masters had stopped in front of his desk—I could tell by a slight unmoving shadow on the curtains—and I wondered if he had discovered, or was about to discover, the loss of his pick.

My blood was boiling within me at the very thought of him—I could hardly wait for the showdown—and yet I was restraining myself, for I wanted it, when it came, to be complete. I still had to discover what manner of hold he had upon Sheila and to what use he put her and his other victims. I had decided definitely that victims they were—that all who came in close contact with this malevolent person were made in some manner to serve his purposes.

The shadow upon the curtain moved suddenly, and receded. Evidently Masters had not examined his desk too closely. If he had noted the absence of the golden pick, I was certain he would have made some outcry. But I could only hear his voice speaking calmly to Sheila. I could not distinguish his words. My concern now was whether or not I would, even there on the balcony, be able to see within. If the drapes overlapped—

DETACHING myself from the partial protection of the wall, I stepped boldly into the broad moonlight. To my first glance, the draperies presented a solid front. But suddenly I spied the narrow opening for which I hunted, and quickly adjusted my eyes along the line of light. I could see neither the right nor left portions of the room, only the dais and what was immediately in front of it, between it and the French doors. But that was enough.

Sheila sat in the throne-like chair, almost lost in its immensity. She sat quite motionless, her eyes closed, her lips parted strangely, as though she were about asleep, yet wanting to speak. Against the deep purple covering of the carved chair, her white skin and honey-colored hair and loose, carnally transparent white robe made a picture I shall never forget. Her bracelet, clinging closely to her arm, seemed somehow part of it—and a c t u a l l y a part of Sheila in some inexplicable manner. It seared itself lastingly into my brain as I took in all the beauty, significance and horror of the scene.

Maynard Masters stood in front of her. His back turned squarely to me. I could not make out what he was doing. He was speaking in a sort of incessant monotone, the while he made all sorts of peculiar gestures and passes with his hands. Once she tried to open her eyes, but he shook his head, and continued the passes, and she obediently closed them again.

Fury swelled within me till I could no longer keep it in bounds. I tore open the French doors and burst into the room. Masters whirled speechlessly.

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At sight of me his chagrin and rage almost equalled mine. We were mortal enemies at last, mortal and ready and in the open.

We stood a minute in fierce exultance, then rushed at each other. In that moment Sheila passed her hand across her brow, opened her eyes, took in the situation. She let out a bewildered cry.

"Father! Todd!"

Half-fainting, she came and threw herself between us. I caught her in my arms. Masters came at me again. But Sheila opened her eyes. This time her horrified shriek stopped him.

"Don't! Father!"

He dropped his clenched fists. As the fury left him, I could almost see his inner rage congeal into that unutterable iciness which I had witnessed before. Still, he could not refrain from baring his teeth a little as he addressed Sheila.

"It is your contention — this young man—does not meddle?"

Sheila did not reply. Dazedly she left my arms and went dutifully to stand beside him, at the same time casting me a glance of bewildered reproach.

Masters straightened. In his look contempt and triumph blended almost equally.

"You will leave our house at once."

I did not look at him, but at Sheila. She turned her eyes away.

Now my gaze met Masters! We stood a full minute, eye to eye; then, without a word I strode from the room, got my things together, and left that ominous house. I had not seen Sheila again; but the almost inaudible cry she uttered as I left that third-floor room echoed and swelled and reechoed with every step I took away from her.

It was that involuntary cry which told me surely that Sheila's feeling for me was as deeply rooted as mine for her, that she would be more than glad to see me when I returned.

And return I would, not to kill, but to bring to honest justice the man who had killed my father!

PUTTING up at the only inn in the village, I quickly undressed and went to bed. But I could not sleep. I waited impatiently for daylight, then dressed again and hurriedly shaved and breakfasted, and set out to find one of the free paupers or at least a "dark horse" that I had been told about.

But every trail ended at a blank wall. The "dark horses" were all still serving terms, it seemed. When Masters got them put away, he did it thoroughly. The paupers, too, were apparently all gone from the vicinity. Nobody knew where they had gone, or when. They had just disappeared. All day I traced down clues, one by one, only to wind up in each case in a dead end.

Tired, and somewhat disgruntled, but unwavering in my purpose to get the dope, and all the dope, on the wily Masters before making any of his guilt known to Sheila and the proper authorities, I returned to the inn and went once more to bed, sleeping exhaustedly through the hours which intervened between then and eleven o'clock, for which hour I had left a call.

When the call came I arose, refreshed, and as I set off for Masters Hall, I felt that I was well prepared for any opposition or ordeal which should present itself that night. I wanted to reach the Hall early, for I felt that with me out of his house, and out of the picture—or so he thought—Masters would feel free to pursue his corrupt third-floor activities, making up for all the time I had lost him, as soon as Sheila's other guests had taken themselves off to bed, which I knew usually occurred around midnight.

Masters Hall, when I reached it, was still well ablaze with lights, showing

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none of that sinister quality which became too evident the moment all those lights were extinguished. I circled the house, going first to the thicket, from which I watched for an opportunity to steal indoors by the open side entrance, which I knew was left unlocked during the few minutes the house servants were departing for their night quarters, after which Lovelace barred it securely.

My chance came. I slipped in at the door, and made my way the short distance to the rear stairway without encountering any servants or guests, or Sheila or Masters. But near the head of the stairs, I heard Masters' commanding voice.

"Be sure you lock things well tonight, Lovelace."

And his valet's reply,

"As tight as a drum, sir."

Even in my panic — lest Lovelace should descend by the back stairs and I be discovered—I could not keep back a smile. I was enjoying already the expression on Masters' face when I should confront him a little later—

There was no place to conceal myself. I could only wait on those stairs, and trust providence. I heard Masters go into his room; heard the soft footsteps of Lovelace on the carpeting of the upper hall. Were they receding or approaching?

They were a p p r o a c h i n g! As I crouched, ready to spring upon him the instant he came in sight, Masters himself saved me from detection. The door of his room reopened momentarily.

"Lovelace!"

The man halted, and turned.

"Lovelace, will you ask Sheila to break up her party for tonight? Right away?"

"Yes, sir. At once, sir."

With no delay Lovelace retraced his steps to the front stairway, and I was free to continue mine up the next flight of stairs to the third-floor sanctuary. Once inside I concealed myself.

MASTERS and Sheila entered the third-floor room a few minutes later. As M a s t e r s purposefully switched on the lights, relocked the massive, carved door, and drew drapes across French doors and windows, I searched Sheila's face anxiously. In spite of the fact that I had known her father would do her no bodily harm, I had not kept from worrying about her. Also, I must admit, I was eager to know what exact effect my absence might have had upon her spirits.

So I examined her lovely face critically, and my heart could not prevent its leap, at once glad and contrite, at her obvious wanness and dejection. I had never before seen her disspirited, and felt horribly concerned about it, as Masters clearly did, likewise.

"Quit mooning, Sheila. It does not become you."

"No, father."

"Besides, it is imperative you be at your best tonight."

"Yes, father."

Languidly she took her place in the throne-seat. She was garbed as the night before. Filmy flowing robe, feet encased in loose white sandals, bracelet gleaming upon her wrist, her eyes of amber and hair the color of molten honey, all contributed their share to the same unforgettable picture. Only the pallor below her eyes was different.

Standing in front of her, Masters went immediately to work. He repeated all those curious passes and gestures which I had partially seen on the previous night, and again spoke to her in that same weird monotone. It was a name, I discovered, that he kept repeating, singsong fashion, to Sheila—the name of the son in the recent case he had taken, the case in which he had

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pledged himself to free both son and father as co-defendants.

Sheila's eyes closed heavily, and remained so. Soon her lips parted. She began to peak.

"Father."

"Yes, my little Sheila."

"I see Perry Saunders, father."

"Yes, yes. But what do you see?"

"He has just entered his home. There are bodies on the floor of the living-room. Two of them. But he is not responsible, father. He is shocked, in anguish. One of them is his mother. He doesn't know what to do. Now he is going to the phone, he is calling the police—"

"Enough, Sheila." Masters snapped his fingers. "We know all that already. His father committed the crime. You told me that last night. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, father. He shot his wife, and just then her maid came in and was going to report him, so he had to shoot her, too. And then he—"

"Now, Sheila." Her father's masterful voice cut briskly short the flow of words, to him no longer important. "What you have yet to determine is Perry's whereabouts — from the moment he left his home that fateful morning, until he returned in the evening to find—"

HE WAS making the passes again. He was repeating Perry's name again, over and over and over, until I felt that I must put an end to it if Sheila did not. Anything to stop that cursed monotone!

But soon Sheila began to talk again, to recount every move of Perry's, every act, precisely as her father desired, until she had come again to the end of his day, and was about to reconstruct once more his entrance into the scene of tragedy—

Again Masters stopped her.

"Now, Sheila," he was about to set her off on a new tangent, "we must know something of the relations between Perry Saunders and his father—not so much what Saunders, Junior, thinks of his dad—but how Saunders, Senior, really feels toward the boy—what steps he would take to save him if—"

I did not follow. If Perry Saunders was innocent, why must he be saved? Why must the guilty father take the steps to save his innocent son? Was not Masters retained to save them both?

The drama continued. Once again, in some unearthly manner that I did not attempt to comprehend, and at which I could only marvel, Masters projected Sheila's astral mind into the minds of Saunders Senior and Junior to evoke some past episode between them. It did not take her long.

"Father! I see them quarreling! Again and again! Why, they're always quarreling, father! Now it is over the mother. Perry, Junior, objects to his father's cruel treatment of her. Now it is their business, father. They are partners, and Perry, the son, uncovers some dishonest practices—he threatens his father; he says he will turn him over to the law—"

"And Perry, Senior?"

"He is afraid, father. He lives in constant fear of Perry, Junior—and of his wife—afraid they will give him away. He hates him, father. He fears and hates him."

"Enough." I caught in Masters' eyes, even behind his glasses, the glint of a new triumph. "He will take no steps then. Our case is nearly settled, Sheila."

Cold sweat suddenly covered my forehead. At last I saw his design, to free the father by turning the crime upon the innocent son, now that he had

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made certain no paternal love and contrition would interfere to upset his outrageous scheming. A few false witnesses, further to implicate the boy, a few to establish alibis for Saunders, Senior—

I was right.

ONE by one, he began to pry into the lives of the list of minor witnesses, those he had just ascertained from Sheila as concerned in the movements of Perry, Junior, on that last, tragic day. One by one, through Sheila, he dug into their character and financial status—determining those who would be most subject to bribery.

It was appalling. I could stand no more. But I did not want the showdown yet— No, not yet. An idea had been forming in my mind, which, if I could figure some means to carry it out— If I could get Masters even briefly from that room, before he had brought Sheila from her trance-like state—

The only course I could think of was the simplest—that of hare and hounds. But I would double back— I resolved to give it a try.

Masters' back was partly turned to me. Silently I lifted the heavy hanging which had concealed the corner into which I had wedged myself, and was free of it. The two peepholes I had cut in the cloth stood out like telltale eyes. Masters' incantation has ceased. But it shortly began again — a new name, stated and restated in endless repetition—

My eyes concentrated on the carved door which was my first goal. I made a dash for it, turned its key in the lock, grabbed it open, was outside with the door closed behind me and streaking down the front stairway almost before Masters could realize what had happened. I could fancy his cruel eyes fairly starting from their sockets behind his glasses. He would suspect my identity even if he had not had time to be certain of it. And he would follow—

He did. But by the time he had taken up the chase, I was already doubling back, climbing the rear steps two at a time, opening the locked door at the top with my master key—

There were two things I was counting on. That Masters would arouse Lovelace, and no one else. That together they would search the big house thoroughly before returning to the third-floor sanctuary. That might just give me time—

SHELIA was moving restlessly; but her eyes were still closed. Locking us into that third-floor room, alone, together, I took a stand in front of her. I began to repeat a name in an endless, singsong fashion. It was her father's true name that I kept repeating to her— M. M. Marsters. That was all. Over and over and over. M. M. Marsters. He had had no first name in those days. Just initials. M. M. Marsters.

Sheila had quit stirring. She was very quiet. But her lips parted suddenly, and she smiled.

"Father."

"Yes—Sheila?"

"I see you, father."

"What else do you see?"

She stayed silent a minute, frowning, as at something which puzzled her.

"But is it you, father? Yes, yes, I see now. It's you—in your youth. You are young, father, and handsome and laughing—" She broke off, troubled again. "No, now I can't see your laugh. You are trying to fool me, father. You have put on a mask."

I was beginning to tremble all over. But I tried to steady my voice as I questioned urgently.

"Why, Sheila? Why have I put on

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that mask?"

"Take it off, father. I don't like it. Please take it off!"

Her voice was rising. It must not reach the floors below.

"Yes, Sheila," I agreed hurriedly. "I'll take it off. But first tell me why, dear. Why have I put on the mask?"

"I don't know. I don't know. But I'm afraid, father. There is something in your eyes—" She was beginning to concentrate again. "I cannot understand—"

"Try to understand, Sheila. Try."

"Yes, father." She spoke now obediently. "There is someone near to you—a partner. You are in your mine. He has something in his hand—a little golden pick. He does not see you. And you have something in yours—something for him—you have hidden it behind you—it is your partner you are teasing, father—"

Suddenly there burst from her lips a cry of terror.

"Don't! Don't, father! Don't strike him—!"

TOO late I tried to hush Sheila. She had risen to her feet, terribly distraught. She had begun to cry and moan. Her eyes were coming open. The agony in them was awful to see.

"You did it, father. You killed him. Oh, why did you? And with a pick! Oh, why did you do it, father—?"

The front doorknob rattled menacingly. Suddenly there was pounding on the heavy, carved wood. Sheila's babbling stopped. Her eyes were clearing. She began to look at me steadily.

The pounding increased.

"Todd!" Sheila's recognition of me was glad but bewildered. "What are you doing here? What is that noise? Where's father?" She passed her fingers uncertainly across her forehead as though in an effort to clear it. "I just had the most dreadful dream about him!"

Taking her by the shoulders, I looked into her amber eyes long and deeply. I shook my head.

"That was no dream, Sheila."

She shrank back from me frightenedly.

"Todd! What—what are you talking about?"

"The same thing you are. The murder of my father by yours—with a pickaxe—for his share of a trifling gold mine—not even a valuable one—Thank God it was revealed to you, Sheila. Now you must believe me—"

But she was trying not to. Her mind was in revolt. She did not want to believe. Yet somehow her tremendous agitation had wakened her out of her spell before her mind's transition period had brought her the usual forgetfulness of all she had seen in it—

I showed had her father's small golden pick, and its companion, each significantly engraved with the name of its owner. I made clear her father's evil purposes in subjecting her mind to his—my purpose in drawing him away so I might return to use his very medium for his own undoing. But she still shook her head. I do not believe Sheila still felt her father innocent; but, still loving him, she refused to admit his guilt. I had one further proof to offer.

"Sheila. The murderer of my father had tattooed on the back of his left shoulder the figure of some strange Hindu god. I think at one time he embraced that philosophy—"

Sheila turned very pale. I had to steady her arm to keep her from falling.

"You have seen that tattoo?"

"Yes, Todd. It is of Krishna. The eighth incornation of Vishnu— Oh, Todd!"

She came into my arms at last, sob-

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bing brokenly.

THE pounding upon the door had subsided. They began to batter it in now. They could not shatter its bulk. They were tearing it from its hinges. Sheila was first to notice.

"Go, Todd. Go quickly. If he finds you here, he will kill you, too."

"And leave you?"

She was averting her eyes.

"I can never go with you. I am bound to him, Todd. To serve his will. So long as he lives. Bound by this bracelet."

The bracelet! Sheila's massive metal bracelet, with its devil-eyes— What was she saying about it?

"The tattoo was not all of Krishna father brought from the Orient, Todd. Not the worst. In this bracelet—the mind of Krishna lives again—to help any wearer look into the past—see anything that has happened—"

"Preposterous!"

"No, it's true, Todd. Dad even has the ancient parchment of instructions. The seer must wear it at least a day and night before each sitting—the longer it is worn beforehand, the more completely the veil of the past is rent—Have you not noticed how Krishna himself wore bracelets—great, giant ones—two on his wrists, and two on his ankles?"

It was incredible. Sheila's bracelet then formed the missing link in the mystery of Maynard Masters. I already had ascertained when, where and why. The bracelet supplied the how. By some preternatural power which I did not pretend to understand— I did not care to understand it! I would have wrest the evil band from Sheila's wrist at that moment, but it was still locked there.

The door came in with a terrific thud. Masters was through the opening and at me in a flash. I was conscious of various faces in the room: Sheila's, white and stricken; Lovelace's, set and watching for a chance to aid his master; those of the guests, tense and fearful and expectant; Masters, deadly, set for the kill. He began to close in, slowly.

As he came near enough, I lashed out with my right fist, but he dodged my blow and came on again. After that our fists flew into each other with telling impact. Masters was down, and I was up. Then I was down and Masters was up. Once when Masters was over me, he started to kick me in the face. But I rolled so violently under him that he lost his balance and crashed to the floor instead. Again, I struck him a body blow that made him double up in pain.

BUT actually we were getting nowhere. We were each venting our hatred, bloodying each other up pretty badly, but that was about all. Masters must have arrived at that same decision about the time I did. Suddenly he grabbed up a chair, and swung it at me. I ducked to the floor; it missed me by a fraction of an inch. Masters bellowed his rage, the frustrated cry of a madman. And he must have gone fairly mad to do what he did next. He snatched up from the treasures on his table a thin, vicious-looking dagger and sprang at me with it.

As I said, I was on the floor at the time. Sheila shrieked, and tried to throw herself between us. But Lovelace held her back. It was one of the guests who stepped in, and decided the issue. As Masters made his frenzied rush, the youth stuck out his foot. Masters tripped and fell—stabbing himself as neatly upon his dagger as he had meant to stab me.

I got shakily to my feet. Sheila came shudderingly into my arms. I held her

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closely. But suddenly I felt against my arm a band of utter coldness, such frigid coldness that I felt for an instant some force not of this earth had somehow come close and touched me— The bracelet! There was one thing yet to do.

"Lovelace."

The servant looked up at me, as he knelt beside the dead man.

"Masters has on him somewhere the keys to Sheila's bracelet. Will you find them for us?"

For just an instant, at my use of the word "us," Sheila looked at me gratefully, then rested her head again upon my shoulder.

A minute later Lovelace handed me the keys. Putting Sheila from me for just an instant, I unlocked her bracelet with eager fingers, then savagely broke it in halves. Sheila's bracelet, Masters' bracelet, Krishna's bracelet, was no more.

HOW YOU SLEEP

By ALEXANDER BLADE

Scientists have peered at us while we sleep, and here are their conclusions on how we do it

WHAT would you think if you knew that someone was watching your every movement while sleeping? Hundreds of subjects, however, have volunteered their services in experiments delving into the problem of how we sleep.

Most recent experiments show that young children change from one position to another more than adolescents do. College "co-eds" rest more quietly than men of the same age. Sleepers of middle age usually keep one position longer than college men and women. Husbands as a class are more restless than their wives. (This can be explained on an occupational basis. The men studied were composers, artists, writers, engineers, draftsmen, mathematicians, and others who continue their work at home in their spare time, retire late, go to sleep immediately, stir frequently, and rise early. Their wives, on the other hand, spend the later evening hours in lounging, reading, or thinking about the day's social activities.) A few elderly sleepers were studied. One, 64 years old, is a skilled mechanic and sleeps quietly; the other, past 70, is a wealthy business man, fears he has insomnia, yet is really a quiet sleeper. Both these individuals are exceptions in their class, since elderly men are more restless sleepers.

A study made of 50 tubercular women in an Ohio sanitarium showed that these bed-fast patients slept more peacefully when their condition was more serious and gradually became more and more active as their condition improved.

In studies of influenza patients, too, sleep activity became more prevalent as the condition improved and normal strength was returned.

The conclusion made, then, is that frequent changes of bodily position is an important factor of healthy sleep. *As many as 20 to 45 or even 50 changes during a typical night is expected of any healthy individual.*

An interesting sidelight is the question of people with insomnia. Are people who think they are insomnious really so more than others? It has long been suspected that such individuals awaken but little more often than normal people and usually stay awake a little longer time, but the crux of the matter is that they pay enough attention to the facts and conditions of their awakening to recall them the next day, while the average person does not.

ANOTHER sidelight is the choosing of a comfortable bed. Are people capable of selecting the most comfortable mattress from a group of mattresses? Scientific observation has shown that the bed voted most comfortable by subjects was *not* the one on which they lay still for the longest times. The bed equipment voted most inferior (a hammock-type woven spring combined with a hard mattress) was really the one on which most of the sleepers slept most soundly. The combination voted most comfortable (a luxurious innerspring mattress with an upright coil bedspring) hardly approached the so-called "inferior" grade in actual comfort facilitation!

A few more interesting facts center about the topics of typical sleep positions, times of least activity, and regular sleeping habits.

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At 11:30, the subject was put to bed. In the first five minutes, there was continued stirring. In the interval between 11:35 and 11:40, the subject stirred in 68 percent of the nights studied. (This sleeper was studied for two years.) In the interval between 11:40 and 11:45, he stirred in 57 percent of the nights. The time of least movement occurred between 12:20 and 12:25 A.M., when the subject stirred in only 6 percent of the nights. This must be the favorite time for resting, it was concluded, since only an hour later the sleeper moved more than four times as often. Graphs were made of these periods of relative "active" and "passive" states and were shown to record an almost perfect rhythm or alternating regularity of movement and quiet.

"Now," asked the experimenter, "will the time of least activity always be between 12:20 and 12:25 A.M., no matter what time the subject goes to bed, or does the period of least activity occur, as in the given case, 50 minutes after retiring?" The latter was found to be true. When the subject was put to bed at 10 P.M. instead of 11:30, his period of least activity was found to be in the neighborhood of 10:40 and 10:45 P.M.—the same *relative* time as in the first case!

"So," the playboy may conclude, "I can go to sleep anytime I want and I'll still get the same benefits." But Science stops the gigolo dead in his tracks! The above conditions hold true only when regularity of each schedule is established. Thus, college students and office workers who practice holding week-end parties from 10 P.M. to 2:30 or 3 A.M. and return to their daily schedule of 8:30 or 9 A.M. rising and 10 or 10:30 P.M. retiring do not benefit at all. Instead, the individual usually labors under the effects of the late hours throughout the week and gets back "on the beam" only in time for another fling.

Scientists have shown, too, that the damage cannot be avoided if the person takes a nap before he leaves for the party or if he sleeps late the next morning. The damage, as can be seen, is the upsetting of a vital schedule, not the shortening of sleep-hours.

This discussion helps clarify the question of the truth of the old proverb: "An hour's rest before midnight is worth two thereafter."

ANOTHER of these interesting experiments was the one concerning "sleep-mates." Observations were made of husband and wife, parent and child, brothers, sisters, and dormitory partners —pairs of individuals who sleep in the same bed or near each other in the same room. One would think that in the observation of the husband and wife (this pair slept together for 38 years) practice in sleeping together would influence reactions toward common sleeping positions and activities, but, aside from chance factors, no correlation was found at all! The same was found when the other sleeping pairs were studied—each individual behaves almost independently of the other, no matter how long they have been bed-fellows.

This throws some light upon another proverb—and common superstition. If a child sleeps with an elderly person, will he lose some of his vitality? Will the elderly person gain some, then? As can be guessed from the previous paragraph, there is no evidence to support such claims. The loss of the child's vitality, if any, is caused, perhaps, by the restless and noisy movements of the elder, making it difficult for the child to rest properly. The elder may gain a little body heat from the child at certain times of the night but the child loses it anyhow as a natural process.

In what positions do healthy people sleep? No unanimity of opinion has been reached by medical men after 150 years of "authoritative" commenting. Some say to lie flat on the back; others shudder at the mention of such a position. Some say stomach; some say right side; others say any position at all. What, then, is the layman to use as a guide? The latest research on how healthy people sleep is summarized in the following paragraphs:

Each sleeper has a repertory of a dozen or more different rest poses.

On any typical night, the sleeper will use all of these poses, changing from one to the other from 20 to 30 times, depending upon individual sensitivity to various body irritations.

The favorite position of most healthy sleepers is the "swimming sprawl" (on one side and on the abdomen), assuming supporting positions with his elbow and knee, thrusting the other arm behind him, and extending the other leg. In general, many "prone" positions (flat on the abdomen) rather than "supine" positions (flat on the back) are favored.

The thing to remember, however, is that while each of many bodily positions is desired at some moment, it is only a question of time before it must become a bad position. Local irritation and the hampering of general and continuous bodily functions appear and a change in position is a natural result. But if one does not move a healthy muscle for a long time, it may get "set" and may really be injured at the next movement. Thus, when any pose becomes irritating, the sleeper should change into another that relieves the irritation, and restful sleep may again continue. One can easily observe that each new position assumed seems to be well-adapted to the relief of strains set up in the previous position.

The bed to choose, then, must be one that can take care of all the conditions described. It must permit the sleeper to take as many positions as are necessary to rest every part of the body. Any limitation of positions because of uncomfortable or irritating parts of the bed-spring and mattress is a good sign that they should be discarded and replaced by some good ones.

Happy sleeping!

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»»» Introducing ««« THE AUTHOR

Doris Thomas

Doris Vancel—born Doris Thomas in Kansas City, Missouri, in— Ah! Men may tell all. Let them! The only thing I'll expose about my birth date is that I don't mind it any more. Not since I read "They Gave Him a Rope" by H. B. Carleton in the last issue of FANTASTIC. When I run across a good unique idea—like growing younger every year—I just adopt it. Why not? So I adopted Carleton's.

But to get back to me. When I was fourteen I was destined to be an artist—by myself. So I copied magazine covers for a year. Then at fifteen I decided to be a writer. So I read and wrote, and wrote and read during the next few years. I recall the name of my first story, "The Boy Who Would Not Be Caught." And another that appeared in the high school magazine put out by our journalism class, "In Quest of Viviette." I've not been seasick, but if that's anything like the nausea inspired in me when I look back upon my first literary efforts, it must be all that's told of it. Yes, *any one can learn to write.*

But the editors want this to be about my life—not my writing. So to get back to me. When I was nineteen I saw a play, and decided to be a playwright—just like that! I'd never studied play writing, but that meant nothing to me. So I wrote a play. I quit writing stories. I wrote another play. Then I wrote another play. You can finish out this paragraph yourself, if you'll follow the form of the old legend which at a certain point in its story gets stuck on the sentence, "And another locust came along and carried off a grain of corn. And another locust came along and carried off a grain of corn. And another locust came along—" So I wrote another play. And another. And another.

Two of them have been produced in Little Theatres: "Surface," a full-length drama, by the Pasadena (California) Theatre; "Shadows," a drama in one act, by the Jack and Jill Players, Chicago. But I've written my plays for Broadway! I've written them to win the Pulitzer Prize! Which reminds me of a play I wrote last year about the war and world federation—an out-and-out propaganda play, the hardest to get produced! But I had to write it. It kept gnawing at me till I spent eight months in research and writing—and got it off my mind onto paper. "My Brother's Keeper" presents modern warfare as it affects civilian life; its tolls; a solution; and an idea of war's ultimate (and not too distant) destruction of our civilization if we overlook the solution and allow science and invention during another twenty or thirty-year truce to prepare for a more encompassing and diabolic war than any one now could envision even in FANTASTIC. Of all the things I've ever written, this drama is my pet.

But it was a lot of fun to write "The Bracelet," to write something aimed at an actual market. "The Bracelet" is a "first" in a lot of ways: My first straight adventure story; my first for the pulp field; my first to be accepted and bring in a check. Notice the grin in my picture? That's how I felt and am still feeling over breaking into FANTASTIC. If you, after reading my story, get one-half of one per cent of the pickup I gained from writing and selling it, "The Bracelet" won't have been a flop.

But the editors said this was to be autobiographical. The truth is, I can't write a story simply about my life. I can't write anything about my life without writing about my writing. They've been that mixed up. No, I've no separate personality—I'm just a writer. And that's my story.

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READER'S PAGE

BEST IN 1942

Sirs:

In my opinion, the best stories in your magazine for 1942 were:

1. *March*—"War on Venus," by Edgar Rice Burroughs. He is my favorite author and this is one of his best stories.

2. *April*—"Hok Visits the Land of Legends," by Manly Wade Wellman. The best story of the series, so far.

3. *April*—"Time Wounds All Heels," by Robert Bloch. All the Lefty Feep stories are good, but this was one of the best.

4. *June*—"Cupid Takes A Holiday," by Duncan Farnsworth. Probably most people won't agree, but I think this was one of your best.

5. *July*—"The Eagle Man," by Don Wilcox. The best story you published this year, if not the best you have ever published.

6. *August*—"Creegar Dares to Die," by David W. O'Brien. A very interesting story.

7. *September*—"Son of a Witch," by Robert Bloch. Another one of the best Lefty Feep yarns.

8. *September*—"The Bottle Imp," by Dwight V. Swain. One of the best of the year.

9. *October*—"Mystery of the Lost Race," by E. K. Jarvis. This author is very good.

10. *November*—"When Freeman Shall Stand," by Nelson S. Bond. Second only to "The Eagle Man"; the second best of the year.

11. *December*—"Lost City of Burma," by Edmond Hamilton. Very interesting story.

12. *December*—"Pegasus Plays Priorities," by David W. O'Brien. Best funny story of the year.

I read the "Return of the Whispering Gorilla" in your February issue, and although it is a very good story, I do not think it is as good as the first one.

In your first two issues for 1943, you have some very good stories. It looks like you'll have a good year if you keep it up.

CARL TYSON,
1558 North Commonwealth,
Los Angeles, Cal.

Your rating of Bond's story in the November issue, leads us to suggest that you read his "That Worlds May Live," in the April, 1943, issue of Amazing Stories. *We think it's one of his best. . . . You'll see a great deal of Wilcox's work during this year.—Ed.*

LIKES WILCOX AND BOND

Sirs:

I don't have to tell you how much I like FANTASTIC, as I wouldn't buy it if I didn't like it. Have read it since last July, with the exception of the August number which I couldn't find anywhere.

I read G. Cunningham's letter in the January, 1943, issue. From his description of the story, I recognized the book, a copy of which I own. So here is the information he wanted: Title is "Children of the Morning." Author, W. L. George. Published by the American Weekly, Inc., 1926. Published in book form by G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London. The Knickerbocker Press, 1927.

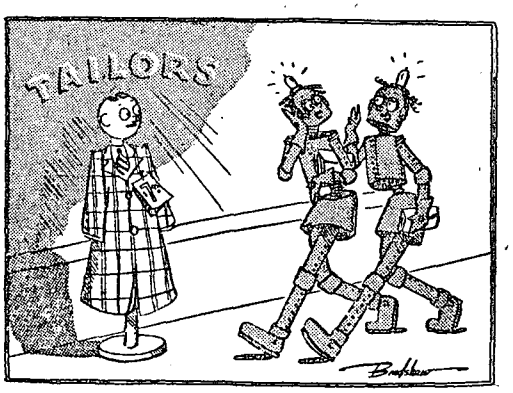
I read "The Whispering Gorilla" some years ago and liked it very much. I have just read the sequel, which also was perfect.

I like Don Wilcox best. And the rest are very good. Especially Nelson S. Bond. I have read the arguing letters about Lefty Feep. What nonsense to argue about him! I find the stories very amusing.

I have been buying the *Amazing Stories* Quarterly, and find them nearly as good as F. A. Could you tell me when the next one is due?

MRS. ERNESTINE LEAVITT,
16 Loring Avenue,
Portland, Me.

Many of our readers have furnished the information on Mr. George's story, and we thank you and them. The Next Amazing Stories *Quarterly should reach the stands about January 30.—Ed.*



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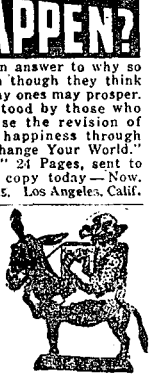

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"REED . . . BRILLIANT BUT CONFUSING"

Sirs:

I think that I have read only three issues of F. A. in my life, and that has been just lately. I find that, in my opinion, many of the stories are really very good. I have just finished the February issue, and don't mind saying that I don't think it is as good, as a whole, as the January number. Although the "Return of the Whispering Gorilla" is a fine piece of work—in fact, this Reed person has a brilliant mind, as far as his pen is concerned—in parts of his story he does get my mind in a confused state. Though I made out the plot, so that was all that was necessary. Another thing, I don't feel that the story was so fantastic; instead, I felt that what happened to Abbott could happen to anyone.

"The Willful Puppets" was most entertaining and gave me many belly laughs, and in these days people do need laughs. Besides, McGivern has a clear and thorough way of writing a story. One needs not stop and figure out his statements or phrases, and I like that.

The other stories did not appeal to me whatsoever, though others may enjoy them.

I am somewhat of an artist myself, as I have made designing a hobby, and I thoroughly disagree with this McNutt character who says that the artist, Paul, can't draw human figures. For the characterization of Icarus and Daedalus is done with very much feeling. Paul expresses his ideas very well, though I never could picture a sky as fiery red on a clear day. Nevertheless, Paul has a right to express his own "mind-pictures," for that's what makes originality. Magarian does nice work too, with definitely a vivid imagination. Jones can really make an ape look vicious, and an angel an angel. He puts reality and feeling into his work. And I'm glad to see he does not forget his perspective in his sketches. In fact, I think Jones will really get somewhere other than as an illustrator, and if I were he, I'd certainly try.

As for the appearance of the magazine, it's as good as any other. I think you need not worry about edges—but contents. If you don't print good stories, you may as well throw the whole thing in the ashcan. One can't expect a $5.00 book for twenty-five cents, so why worry?

Again, I would not say it is the best, but it is equal to any other magazine in its line.

MRS. LORETTA HILGERT,
4537 Page,
St. Louis, Mo.

David Reed, we imagine, will be both pleased and a little dazed by your comments on his "Whispering Gorilla" yarn. And William P. McGivern will be delighted. By this time, you will have read the latter's "Enchanted Bookshelf" which is drawing down a flock of praise. . . . Your defense of Paul is sensible and well deserved. Jones does cover scenes for our companion magazine, Mammoth Detective, *and these also have been well received. Not wishing to end in the ashcan, we'll keep the stories at a high level.—Ed.*

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KING OF CORN?

Sirs:

You did yourselves proud on the February issue, pals! It had everything—even a decent yarn by Robert Moore Williams, the King of Corn.

I rate as follows:

1. *Spawn of Hell.* Wheeeee! Wotta horror! Good enough to take its place beside White's *Lukundoo* as one of the two best spine-chillers in the English langauge. Three cheers for the ed. who'd print it (though what sensible one wouldn't?). His mag is *my* mag.

2. *The Great Train Robbery.* Gosh, the things that this one *didn't* tell! That's what made it good. Any explanation, however fantastic, of the events narrated would constitute an anticlimax. Cabot knew just where to stop to make it effective. Too bad some of your other writers don't.

3. *The Fugitive.* Not bad, not bad. Unique handling of an old plot.

4. *Return of the Whispering Gorilla.* A bit of all right, but it didn't score as high with me as it was supposed to.

5. *Nothing Happens to Lefty Feep.* I'm still laughing.

6. *The Fisherman.* A friend of mine condemned it as irrelevant, but if she'd read all the corn by Williams that I have, she'd gladly overlook that part of it.

7. *Club of the Damned.* Had its points, but not up to that title.

8. *Yesterday's Clock.* It'll pass.

9. *The Willful Puppets.* Ninth place on this summary is no disgrace, but I doubt if McGivern ever equals his *The Contract of Carson Carruthers.*

Re, that blanked Crain whose nasty remarks about F. A. you quoted in the "Editor's Notebook," why doesn't somebody (censored) for me.

Illustrations okay, and in this Mac. versus Jones fight, you can put me down as a Mac. man. Jones has done okay at times, notably on your January cover, but never anything to match the daughter of Genghis Khan on the January, '42 cover.

Once again, how about illustrating a story on the back cover too?

As for trimmed edges, nix. They're not worth enough to rate all the energy Gene Hunter wastes in campaigning for them. F. A. is well worth the quarter you charge, but you'll never lead me to believe that planed rims would in themselves make it worth thirty. But you might bind the covers on even with the pages so they wouldn't tear so easy.

A. S. was good in February, too, but as usual not up to F. A., despite the presence of good old Burroughs.

R. H. Ramsay,
Neche, North Dakota.

We've marked another ballot for McCauley in the Mac. vs. Jones contest. Despite strong Jones support, McCauley leads. As for Williams, luckily—for us!—few readers regard him as King of corn—or even a pretender for the crown!—Ed.

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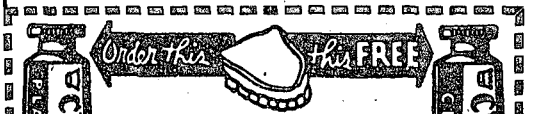

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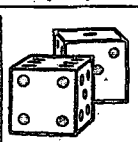

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TEN BEST

Sirs:

First of all, I would like to know whether I can buy back issues of A. S. or F. A. I'm a very new fan since I just started buying F. A. last October. I have looked through the Reader's Page again and again and I see such titles as The Liquid Man, The Eagle Man, etc. And every time I see a title, I want the story that much more.

By the way, I just finished reading your February issue and I think it was swell. All your authors were up to par after that terrible December issue. I thought the December issue was the worst I have ever read, although the others were all very good. Since everybody has rated the ten or twenty best for the year, I will rate the ten best of the last five issues, because that's all I've been able to lay my hands on.

1. Mr. Throop's Incredible Hand.
2. When Free Men Shall Stand.
3. Return of the Whispering Gorilla.
4. The Ice Queen.
5. The Man with Five Lives.
6. Sammy Calls a Noobus.
7. Lefty Feep Catches Hell.
8. The Leopard Girl.
9. Mystery of the Lost Race.
10. The Willful Puppets.

I will also rate the Feep series:

1. Lefty Feep Catches Hell.
2. Lefty Feep and the Sleepy Time Girl.
3. Nothing Happens to Lefty Feep.
4. The Golden Opportunity of Lefty Feep.
5. Jerk, the Giant Killer.

All of the Feep stories were good except Jerk, the Giant Killer.

RONALD P. MADDOX,
(Address not given).

You list many excellent stories, Ronald. And your classification of the Feep series by themselves, is something new. Back issues can be bought from the circulation department.—Ed.

SWAIN DRAWS A BEEF

Sirs:

Since you welcome new fans into your midst, here's another one for you. I'm only twelve years old, but I've been reading F. A. for more than a year. My favorite author is Robert Bloch and my favorite character is Lefty Feep. I wish Bloch would go to Jack's Shack more often. Make your monthly Feep stories permanent. F. A. isn't F. A. without Lefty Feep.

Now here's a beef that's been on my mind for three months. It's about Dwight V. Swain. He wrote two masterpieces—"Crusade Across the Void" and "Shayla's Garden." But lately his stories have been smelly. Hey, how about more like "Crusade Across the Void"?

I see that a certain Mr. Harper of Washington, D. C., doesn't like Lefty Feep. Oh, well; there are some queer minds in the world.

Here are my ratings:

"The Ice Queen"—I was bored to death.

"Freddie Funk's Madcap Mermaid"—Fair.

"The Perfect Husband"—Impossible.

"The Man with Five Lives"—You'd have a much better magazine if that wasn't in it.

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"Saunders' Strange Second Sight"—Nice and different.

"Lefty Feep Catches Hell"—Lovely as usual.

"Mister Trouble"—Oh, no!

"Sammy Calls a Noobus"—Give us more Norton.

Why couldn't you have given *Feep* about half the space of "The Man with Five Lives"? Never did I read a novel with more space and less story in it. I know you have lots of letters to choose from, but please print this. I want to know whether other readers like Swain's more recent stories.

The January front cover was a build-up to a big let-down. Now, you can do lots better than the "Ice Queen."

Keep Norton. "Sammy Calls a Noobus" was really good.

Well, now that I have picked the January F.A. sufficiently to pieces, I don't think there is anything else for me to criticize. Features and illustrations don't count with me; I'll take the stories, although I could do better myself than some of those pics.

Keep Feep flying!

BARBARA G. JONES,
Roxborough,
Philadelphia, Pa.

Since Dwight V. Swain is now a member of the Armed Forces, he will not be able to do much about giving you new stories to cheer about. However, "Drums of Daugavo," in the April issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, *is, we think, one of the best Swain has done. . . . And Lefty Feep is here to stay!—Ed.*

WE SEE STARS!

Sirs:

I have a request to make. It's not about paper or the book; it's simply this: In your first issue you ran a story called "The Sleeping Goddess." Would you please reprint it for the readers' enjoyment?

Now to the February issue:

Six Stars—"The Willful Puppets." It was a great fantasy yarn. Print more stories by this author.

Five Stars—"Return of the Whispering Gorilla." Another good story but it didn't hold my attention too long.

Four Stars—"Nothing Happens to Lefty Feep." A good story about Lefty.

Three Stars—"The Great Train Robbery." Interested me immensely.

Two Stars—"The Fugitive." Only one thing wrong: where do they print the date on a bill?

One Star—"The Fisherman." A good pic and not a bad story.

The others were not worth printing, as I see it.

Here are some questions on the "Whispering Gorilla." Who drew the pictures? I didn't see any name. Also, what does "Apologies to Don Wilcox" mean? I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

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The illustrator for Reed's story was Robert Gibson Jones—both cover and interiors. Don Wilcox is the creator of the "Whispering Gorilla" character, and Reed requested permission from Wilcox to do a sequel.—Ed.

SHE LOST HER SLEEP!

Sirs:

Don't look now but your magazine just ruined a good night's sleep for me. I got my March copy of F. A. this evening and crawled into bed determined to read just *one* story and then turn out the light. Well, I just finished the last one in the magazine and it's quite a bit later.

Here's a bouquet for Elroy Arno. His "Jones Gets the Willies" tops even Lefty Feep this issue and that, I would once have said, is impossible. By the way, what happened to Lefty this time? I was a little disappointed in him.

"Drummers of Daugavo"—Very good.

"The Man Who Cried Werewolf"—Not too bad.

"They Gave Him a Rope"—Wonderful!

"The Other Abner Small"—I really would like more of him, but . . .

"Enchanted Bookshelf"—Pretty good.

"Trail of the Magic Slippers"—Ummm?

"Tomorrow's Mail"—Fair.

"The Black Brain"—Good.

The whole issue was grand but *why* do all your mythical gods have such pretty, girlish faces?

Please, another story by Arno. Make it soon. I definitely like his little character Willowby Jones.

MISS FRANCES KOHL,
(Address not shown).

We apologize for taking away your beauty sleep—and promise to try to do it again with this issue! . . . Arno, we believe, is quite a find, and you can be sure that he will be back.—Ed.

TRIM THOSE EDGES!

Sirs:

Innocently, the ed. asks us whether we want trimmed edges. Typical of the letters he will receive is that given by the one-man Gallup poll. Judge Gallup (that's me) rises to proclaim: "You said it, brother. My compliments to Gene Hunter who stuck to his guns and gave us this opportunity for a fair vote. And since new improvements seem to be in order, I suggest that you go back to the old large size, using about 130 pages—and toss out the reprints; they're not wanted. Give the new authors a chance.

The business of trimmed edges having been disposed of, I'll tear merrily into the February F. A. Jones' cover is good but he cannot be compared with McCauley; the main difference is, as I see it, that McCauley is an artist while Jones is an illustrator.

The back cover is rather poor; the ghastly red background and Paul's silly humans combine to make this one the worst of the series. It would be better to keep Paul in his own field—machinery, cities, alien landscapes, etc.

By far the best yarn was "The Fugitive," by E. K. Jarvis. Strange, is it not, that this was the

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one story upon which the ed. failed to bestow incredible adjectives telling us, in the Editor's Notebook, how good it was? This tale stood out like a fish in the desert—a very clever story.

Second place is dragged down by Williams' "The Fisherman," while third place goes to "Club of the Damned," by Clee Garson. Costello, McGivern, and O'Brien take fourth, fifth and sixth places respectively with entertaining stories. The rest really didn't matter—they were all mediocre—but I might mention that the supposedly wonderful, thrilling and exciting and incredibly good "Return of the Whispering Gorilla" was just plain hack all the way through. Two words describe it perfectly: "monotonous" and "boring."

Of the interior pix, Rod Ruth's for "The Fisherman" is outstanding, though Magarian was good, too. Malcolm Smith gets a pat on the back for his work on "Club of the Damned"—a vast improvement.

In the "Readers' Page" there is a caption on one of the letters which reads: "Don't Cut Letters!" If someone is really serious on the matter—which I doubt—you can put me down as definitely wanting complete letters; print fewer missives if you must (though with a 244-page mag. I see no reason for having one of the smallest letter departments in the business), but please, *no cuts.*

CHAD OLIVER,
3956 Ledgewood,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

Mr. Hunter will doubtless make use of your remarks on trimmed edges in future letters urging such a change. We're listening. . . . Jarvis' "The Fugitive" needed no raves from us; we like to see our readers make these discoveries for themselves, sometimes. As for cutting readers' letters, we seldom do, unless there are repetitious phrases and the like. Look at your own letter for confirmation.—Ed.

THINGS ARE IMPROVING

Sirs:

The March issue of F.A. was tops. So far, I see a decided improvement in the stories and covers this year. The interiors could still stand a lot of improvement. This issue was a marked example. Magarian, Jones and St. John were all up to par, but Jackson and Ruth fell down miserably. Jones' cover was okay, but how about giving the other artists a crack at the cover? Paul's back cover is always good.

Now to the stories. I'll rate them in this order:

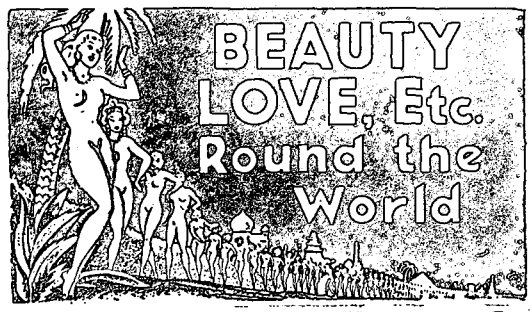
1. "Drummers of Daugavo." Congrats to Mr. Swain for a beautiful story. It held my interest from start to finish.

2. "Enchanted Bookshelf." A very enjoyable story, especially the humorous parts.

3. "They Gave Him a Rope." Carleton shows a lot of promise. How about a novel by him?

4. "Trail of the Magic Slippers." All three of the novelettes clicked in this issue. Cabot always rings the bell.

(Concluded on page 239)



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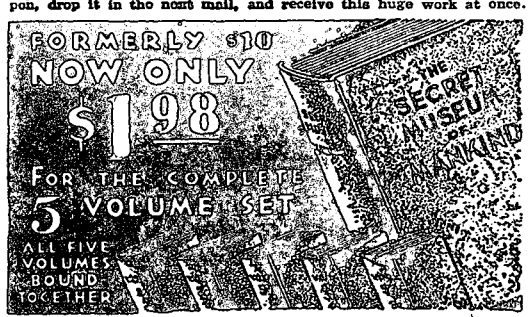

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By MORRIS J. STEELE

He was the god (or man) who performed the twelve most arduous tasks ever assigned to any laborer!

HERCULES, the Latinized form of the Greek, Heracles, was probably not a god at all, since no god was given a name which was a combination of those of other deities. The safest conclusion is that Hercules, of all ancient figures, is the one most certainly a human being.

His story, according to legend and myth, was the most exciting adventure story of all time. Adventure and intrigue filled his life from his birth to his tragic death on a funeral pyre on Mt. Oeta.

To begin with, Zeus, desiring a "lord" for Argolid, assumed the shape of Amphitryon and visited his wife, thereby begetting a son. But Hera frustrated his plans by placing Eurystheus (born just before Heracles) into that coveted position. To make doubly sure, Hera sent serpents to the baby Heracles, to kill him, but the lusty youngster slew them in his cradle.

In young manhood he gained fame by slaying the famed lion of Mt. Cithaeron. This led to his winning of Megara, daughter of Creon, King of Thebes, for his wife. Again Hera interfered, and induced a fit of madness upon Heracles. When he came out of it, he discovered he had slain his wife and children. Apparently for this he was sentenced to be the slave of Eurystheus.

This taskmaster imposed the famous Twelve Labors on his slave. They were: 1—The capture of the lion of Nemea. 2—The capture of the Hydra of Lerna. 3—Capture of the hind (or stag) of Arcadia. 4—Capture of the boar of Erymanthus. 5—Cleansing of the Augeias' stables in Elis. 6—Shooting the birds of Stymphalus. 7—Capture of the Cretan bull. 8—Capture of the mare of Diomedes in Thrace. 9—Taking the girdle of Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons. 10—Seizing the cattle of Geryon. 11—Bringing the apples of the Hesperides. 12—Fetching up Cerberus from the lower world.

The last two tasks are "other world" and can be linked with Homer's story of Hercules (the Iliad) in which he fights and wounds Hades.

The execution of all these tasks involved many minor adventures which in themselves were adventures far beyond those normally experienced by men.

For instance, during the fourth labor, he met and fought the Centaurs. During the eleventh he wrestled with the giant Antaeus.

For a time Hercules was a soldier in the campaigns against Troy, Elis, and Pylos.

Perhaps the most dramatic battle of his hectic career was the struggle with Apollo for the sacred tripod at Delphi. The battle grew so vicious that Zeus brought it to a halt by hurling a thunderbolt between the two fighters.

Other exploits were taking part in the battle between the gods and the giants, and the Argonautic Expedition.

During all this activity, he found time to marry again, and this time wedded Deianeira, daughter of Oeneus, king of Calydon. To win her, he had to wrestle with the river at Achelous, which must have been a fluid battle! Having won her, he was intercepted by the centaur, Nessus, who tried to take her from him. Heracles killed Nessus with an arrow dipped in the venom of the Hydra.

Nessus, even while dying, plotted Heracles' end, and calling to Deianeira, gave her blood from his wound and told her that anyone wearing a garment rubbed with it would love her forever. Years after, when Hyllus and several other children had been born to them, Heracles fell madly in love with Iole, daughter of the king of Oechalia. Heracles asked the king for his daughter's hand, but was denied. The matter was further complicated when Heracles killed Iole's brother and was sentenced to exile for a year to the Lydian queen, Omphale, who set him to do women's work.

Returning, he captured Oechalia and took Iole prisoner. Deianeira realized that she was a dangerous rival and sent Heracles a garment smeared with the blood of Nessus. Heracles was seized with terrible agonies and knew that he was dying.

In his pain, he directed that he be brought to the top of Mt. Oeta where a huge pyre was built. On this he was put, and a shepherd, Poeas, was induced to light it with the gift of Heracles' bow and arrows.

His mortal body was burned, but his spirit ascended to heaven, was reconciled to Hera, and wedded to Hebe.

Other, later legends give Hercules credit for still more adventures, some of which are better known today than those more credible. He visited Italy, while en route home from the raid on Geryon's cattle, and earned their gratitude by killing the monster Cacus.

He conquered Spain as a side issue to one of his labors, and in the doing, split the Rock of Gibraltar asunder, forming the now famous Straits so vital to the United Nations.

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READER'S PAGE

(Concluded from page 237)

5. "Tomorrow's Mail." A swell short. More stories by Leslie Owen!

6. "The Man Who Cried Werewolf." A good story. Costello could have chosen a better title, though.

7. "The Chance of a Ghost." Way below the Feep standard, but passable.

8. "Jones Gets the Willies." Okay for a new author, but I expect to see better stories by him in the future.

9. "The Other Abner Small." Garson can do much, much better.

10. "The Black Brain." Rotten. It belonged in Amazing Stories.

Let's have some more stories by Bond, Patton, Reed, Wilcox, and Woodruff.

How about a cover by St. John? How about some illustrations by Virgil Finlay?

EUGENE BREWSTER,
99 Featherbed Lane,
Bronx, New York.

We have several stories by Wilcox on tap—most of them novel lengths. We've asked Carleton for more stories, and if a novel's among them, we'll pass it on to you—if it measures up to the one in this issue.—Ed.

HOW TO BUY WAR BONDS!

Sirs:

This is my first letter but I am a steady reader of F.A. Your stories are swell but we like the more serious ones.

That soldier that wrote and said we must be wacky to read such "trash," as he put it, burned me up. I don't know of anything as entertaining, clean and economical as F.A. for pastime. As for me, if it weren't for your books I would be doing something that cost a lot more; whereas I am buying War Bonds with all spare cash.

Everyone I have talked to on the subject says "When Free Men Shall Stand" was the most wonderful story they ever read, and I back them up one hundred percent. "Eagle Man" was another very good story. Don Wilcox, the author, is tops if he keeps that up. As for the covers, I think they are all pretty good; besides, it's what's inside that really counts.

Oh, yes! Those giant size books are okay but just a little hard to handle. I like them smaller.

I was the first of my family to read F.A., and now I have the family and all my friends reading it.

MISS GLADYS FRAZIER,
Jacksonville, Ala.

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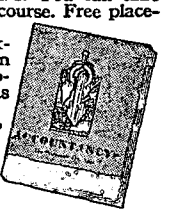

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CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

Jay Chidsey, Green Springs, Ohio, 14 years of age, would like to correspond with interesting people. He is especially interested in chemistry, would like old issues of AS, FA, and other sf mags, to buy . . . not trade. . . . Nora Carrell, Gen Del. Chouteau, Okla., would like to hear from boys in the armed forces from 18 to 20 years of age. She is 5'4½" tall, has brown eyes and hair. Will answer all letters promptly. . . . Russell Wilsey, 87-22-252 Street, Bellerose, New York, N. Y., has the complete "John Carter on Mars" series with the exception of two, "Thuvia, Maid of Mars," and "The Chessman of Mars." He will trade any of the former for the latter. He would also like to obtain the following quarterlies: Fall AMAZING and FANTASTIC, and the summer AMAZING. . . . Miss Tedde Marsh, 1435—36 St., Brooklyn, N. Y., would like to correspond with boys in all branches of the service She is 21 years of age. . . . Jesse Hendrix, P. O. Box 321, Marked Tree, Ark., wants to contact readers of S-F mags interested in correspondence. . . . Pvt. Eugene Baxter, 918 T.S.S. Flight 73C, A.A.F. B.T.C., Clearwater, Florida, 21, 5'8", blond and weighs 160 lbs. Is in training as a Glider Pilot. Would like to hear from girls between the ages of 17 and 21. . . . Richard L. Stucke, 99 Summer St., Watertown, Mass., 18, 5'11½" tall, brown eyes and hair. Will answer all letters from those over fifteen. . . . James Warren Harris, Potrero, Calif., is anxious to hear from any one interested in mental telepathy, the power of thought broadcasting, etc. He is 27 years old and will answer all letters. . . . Charles R. Maytum, 100 Wayne St., Providence, R. I., has AMAZING STORIES from Dec. '39 to Dec. '42 for sale. He also has three quarterlies. He is also interested in boys saving unused U. S. stamps to trade or boys or girls saving mixed stamps which he can sell to them for very low prices. . . . Howard Moore, 12210 Meyers Rd., Detroit, Mich., would like to hear from all interested in becoming members of his recently founded club dealing with witchcraft, ghosts, mental telepathy, and other psychic phenomena. He will be glad to answer all questions and will reply to all letters immediately. Anyone between 15-19 everywhere welcome. He would also like correspondence with anyone on any subject. . . . R. H. Ramsay, Niche, No. Dak., wants information on science fiction authors. The name of each; year of birth and death, if dead; names of a few of his works, and characteristics. . . . Joseph M. Vallin, Jr., 5809—33 St., Washington, D. C., has the following Burroughs' books for sale: Carson of Venus, Pirates of Venus, A Fighting Man of Mars, Tarzan and the Lost Empire, Tanar of Pellucidar and Tarzan and the Ant Men. They are all in good condition. Price is 50c each or will trade. . . . George C. Price, 5 Stearns St., Massena, N. Y., wants readers to send 100 different stamps and 3-cent stamp. Will return 150 different, same quality. Send larger packages in same ratio if desired. Will answer all writers at once. . . . Eddy Moullee, Gervasio 107, Habana, Cuba, a Cuban young man, 17 years old, wants to correspond with American young people. He will answer all letters promptly. He will write in Spanish, English, French, Portuguese or Esperanto. . . . Roger Smith, England St., Ashland, Va., would like to play correspondence chess with anyone interested. . . . Wesley E. Hall, Rt. 10, Box 127, Fresno, Calif., is looking for members for his club, "The Amateur Science Club." Full information will be sent on request. Also, would like to correspond with anyone who has some annuals or quarterlies of F.A. or A.S. . . . Fantasy Fiction Field, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, N. Y., presents the 1941 yearbook of science fiction which lists all the titles of stories in alphabetical order of all the promags issued in 1941—including AMAZING, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and the quarterlies. Price 20c.

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STRANGE FAMILIES

WE think our types of family organization is the best, don't we? But, unknown to millions of people in our society, are the marriage, family, and divorce customs of more primitive peoples throughout the world.

Very common among primitive peoples is a form called the "consanguine" family organization—built along blood lines. This form has its central core based on relations of brothers and sisters, or of parents and offsprings. With these peoples, the bond between blood kin seems almost stronger than that between mates. Where the husband comes to live with his wife's family, he is regarded as a bit of an outsider. The wife's brother continues to have great influence with her and gives her advice about how to rear her children. The wife's relatives are always of general family interest, while the husband's are not even considered kin. The marital groups within such a broad family structure are thus subordinate to the blood group.

There are certain obvious advantages to the consanguine family. The children have been brought up together since birth, and they are a direct continuation of the same family. In case someone in the family dies, the whole group does not suffer—it can carry on with its social and economic functions quite easily. Great economic efficiency is afforded. Family property remains in common hands for generations, for no hasty inheritance proceedings and re-distributions need be made. The family name, too, becomes almost eternal.

Within this consanguine family organization are other variations of structure. It has already been stated that there are marital groups in the consanguine form, but they are subordinate to the blood group. But sometimes the marital bond may be so minimized to the point where one of the mates is not regarded as being related to the children! The pattern of kinship is traced either through the mother's line or the father's, but not through both. Thus a maternal consanguine family consists of a woman, her children of both sexes, the children of her daughters, of her daughters' daughters, and so on. And the woman's husband belongs to his own mother's family. This is "matrilineal" descent. "Patrilineal" descent occurs, too, in some consanguine societies. It consists of a patriarch, his children, and the children of his male descendants through males.

Another minimization of the marital tie results from the practice of having one of the mates take up residence at the home of the other's people. Where the husband goes to live with his wife's family, the system is known as "matrilocal" residence. Its opposite is called "patrilocal" residence.

Societies that use the consanguine organization and the matrilocal system set up a situation very characteristic of primitive groups. When a man comes to live with his wife's family, he realizes, after traveling from his own group for days (means of travel and communication among these peoples are poorly developed, it must be remembered) that he is entering a life entirely isolated from his former one. Soon, because of this inherent isolation, he will become a known part of his new group. Everybody will not only know him, but will know everything about him. Thus, one of the worst possible punishments is banishment. There is no place to go except among an alien people who do not readily accept strangers. This is probably the most significant feature of the consanguine organization—its essential closely knit character. One observer has said that the "outsider" in such marriages and his position in the household is much like that of a relative who comes to live with a married couple today; "he becomes a part of the family, but hardly the most essential part."

It can be seen, then, that the marital aspect of the family is not necessarily the most important factor among many primitive peoples.

We can now pass to other considerations. One important difference between societies are the provisions for "exogamy" or "endogamy." Exogamy is marriage outside the group; endogamy is marriage within the group. The consanguine organization, we observed, prescribed exogamy, as do many other systems. Why is exogamy so strongly advocated among these peoples? Scientists have discovered that the practice of marrying outside the group is an outgrowth of the taboos against incest in every society. Incest, however, seems to have various definitions. The marriage of mother and son is universally prohibited. In a few cases, however, union of father and daughter is allowed. In ancient Egypt, Peru, and Maya, brothers and sisters had been required to marry—mainly a ruling class tradition "to keep the blood pure" or to continue as "divine beings." In our own country, we have both forms of marriage—state laws forbid the marriage of first cousins (anti-endogamy), yet require marriage with someone of the same race (anti-exogamy).

Marriage of close relatives sometimes is taken to mean marriage of members of the same clan. This takes place, usually, in societies where the recognition of kin is not the same as ours. In the Menomini family circle, boys are addressed by a word indicating the order of their birth, not "son" or "brother." Another society classes all blood-relatives according to generation, regardless of nearness of kinship and maternal or paternal

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affiliation. The Hawaiians, for example, apply a single term, "makua," to both parents and to all these parents' brothers and sisters, sex being distinguished by certain qualifying words. Thus, all related individuals of one generation are classed as brothers and sisters. The children of these brothers and sisters are classed with one's own children, while their children in turn, are classed with one's grandchildren. A single term embraces grandparents and all related members of their generation. This type of age-stratification system occurs, too, in New Zealand, Kusaie, and the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. The Zulu man and woman use the same sort of classification. But in addition to calling the brothers' and sisters' children their sons and daughters without distinction, the children of their father's sister are classed with one's brothers and sisters.

With these expanded groups as "families" (and as time further expands these groups), it can be easily understood why these peoples have different ideas about incest than we have. Such expanded groups, then, constitute clans. Although the people affected by the intra-clan marriage taboos may not even be related by blood, they are nevertheless directly restricted in choosing mates. Even today in China, individuals who bear the same surname may not intermarry, although the original clan connection, if any, may be remote.

What forms of marriage are preferred throughout the world? As in our own society, monogamy, (one woman for one man) is practiced more largely than any other arrangement. Monogamy is a system that sanctions no other arrangement. But monogamy is permitted in societies where other marriage systems are preferred. Thus, while the Koran permits a man to have four wives, few Mohammedans are able to avail themselves of this luxury. Necessity, then, makes monogamy the most common arrangement even in a society which allows another system.

The order of civilization does not seem to have any relationship to the type of marriage system adopted. The Pygmy tribes, for example, practice monogamy. They are primitive hunters, said to be low in the scale of society. Higher types of societies, agriciultural or more advanced hunting cultures have adopted other forms.

Scientific observation has established the fact that, although monogamy is the most widely practiced system, "polygyny" (the marriage of more than one female to one male) is better favored. This may seem strange to the average person who knows there are about 100 men born to every 100 women. This almost perfect balance is often disrupted, however. Hunters, it is known, live a dangerous life. Thus, the number of women after adolescence slightly exceeds the number of men. Among a group of Eskimos studied, there was a sex rate at birth of 105 males to 100 females, but among adults there were only 92 males to 100 females. In the early part of the nineteenth century, among 23,000 Indians of the Great Plains in America, there were only 44 males to 100 females.

Although an excess of women facilitates such a system of polygyny, it must not be supposed that the system requires such a condition. Strong men do not always respect the rights of weaker men. Some, as a result, may have three wives, while others may have none. In one colony in Australia, the older men, appropriate many of the women of the community, forcing some of the younger men to go elsewhere for mates. Another point to remember is that additional wives denote more than added sexual gain. The possession of many wives gives a man prestige, just as do material possesions in our society.

Much more rare than the other systems is the system of "polyandry." This provides for the marriage of more than one male to a female. The Todas of southern India practice polyandry, and adopt either the fraternal or the non-fraternal form. In the fraternal form, a group of brothers share a wife. In the second variety, the wife travels around the different settlements where her husbands live and spends a certain length of time with each. Fatherhood in the fraternal form is shared by all the husbands—the child addresses them all "father." In the non-fraternal form, one of the husbands is selected by ceremony to be the child's legal parent. Thus, while the Todas do not emphasize biological paternity, they do stress legal or social paternity.

There have been attempts to explain polyandry, but none of the stereotyped explanations has a scientific basis. The Todas practice the ceremony of killing female infants, but the Tibetans in the Himalayas, who do not indulge in female infanticide, also practice polyandry. It seems, perhaps, that the poverty of the people and the small economic utility of the women facilitate the adoption of such a system.

Sometimes, "group marriage" is considered a fourth system. It was known to have been practiced in the Marquesas Islands, but, since it is not used there any longer, the classification is being abandoned. It is more a transitional or temporary system. When the British tried to suppress Toda infanticide, a more equal distribution of the sexes resulted, and a few groups of brothers consequently took on collectively a number of wives.

Promiscuity is seldom found among these peoples. Group marriage is itself a well-organized system, always controlled. As a matter of fact, most scientists say that sexual license is severely criticized and, wherever possible, prohibited. These cultures often witness such behavior among young unmarried persons, but it is never disorganized or obvious. Wife-lending or exchange of partners is sometimes done under special conditions. But these few measures of variety and experimentation never interfere with or disrupt the orderliness of family life.

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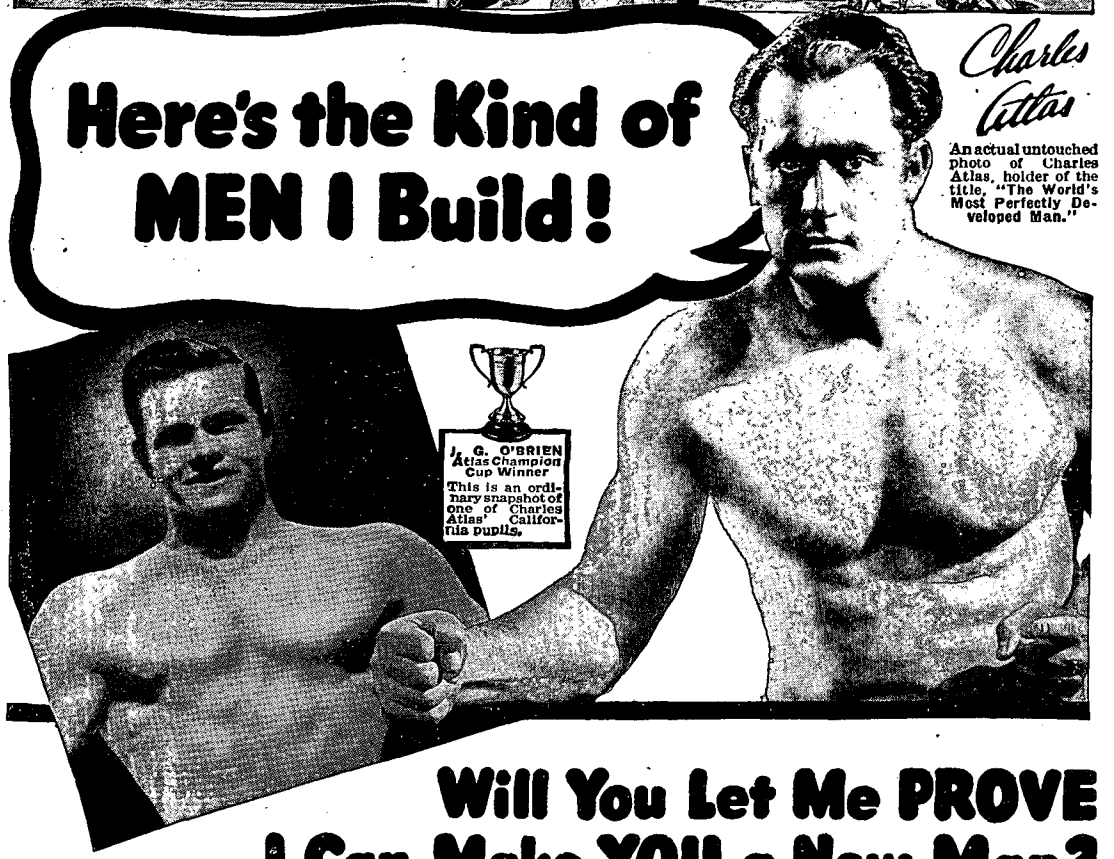

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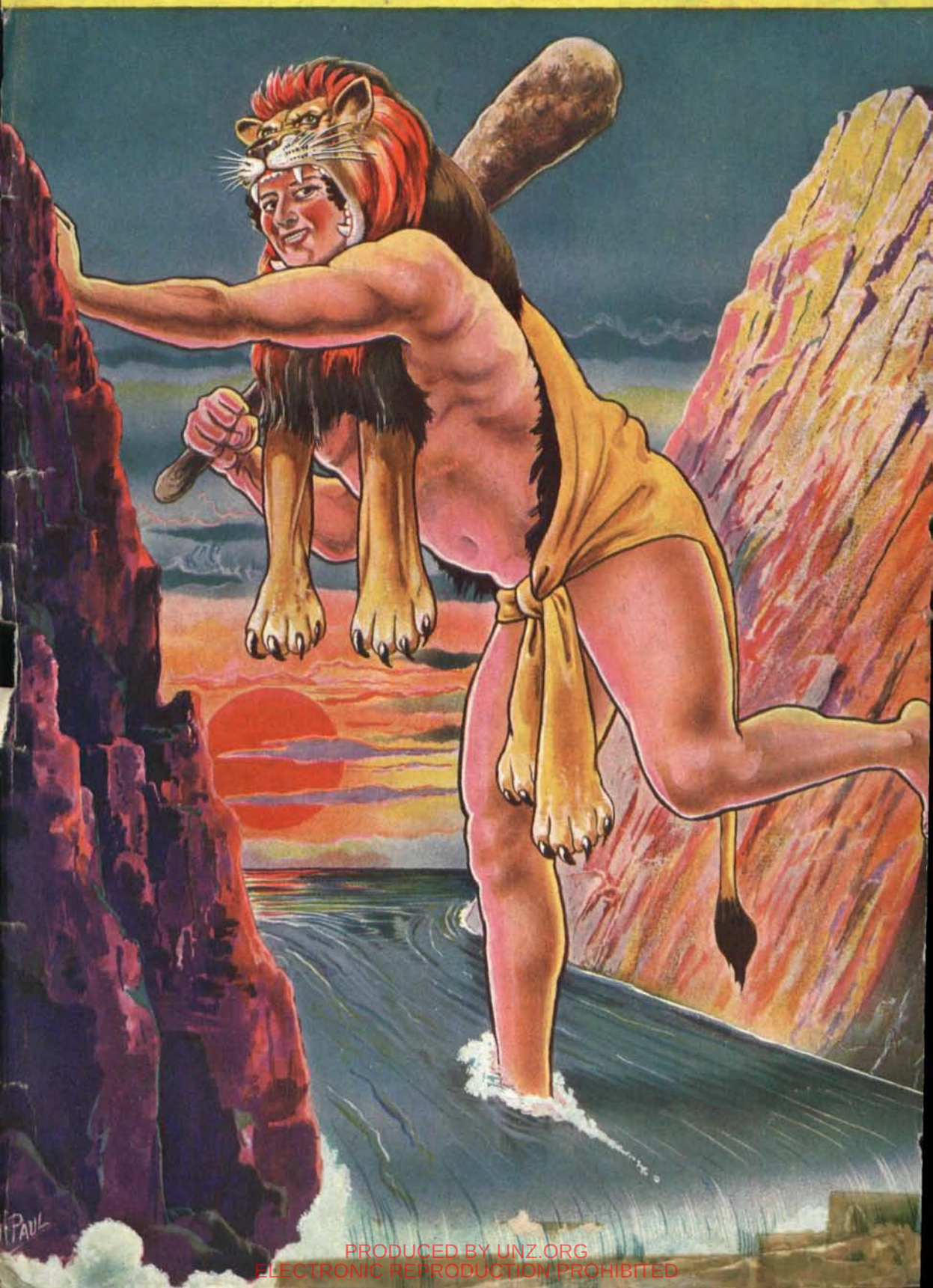

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